

On the Paradox of Tragedy: Notes for the Balance of Its Theoretical Heritage*

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ABSTRACT. This paper examines some of the theories that were proposed to answer the paradox of tragedy during the eighteenth century, tracking what these theories, in their diversity, show with respect to the assumptions within which the paradox of tragedy arises and the limits and possibilities this approach may offer to answer the problems raised by our aesthetic response to the pain of others. The theories can be classified according to four basic positions. The analysis of these positions encourages us to study this phenomenon from a perspective that takes into account the broader anthropological and ethical context of our emotional reactions to others and keeps in mind the peculiarities that involves the viewer's position (in contrast to the sufferer's position). Also, the analysis suggests that we set aside the search for a common solution and try to develop answers that account for the relevance of differences in both the cultural and normative context of emotional reactions, as well as how various genres and particular works model and structure these reactions.

1. Introduction

In Book IV of the *Republic*, Socrates reminds Glaucon of the way our motivations can conflict between them narrating the story of Leontius:

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"But," I said, "I once heard something that I trust. Leontius, the son of Aglain, was going up from the Piraeus under the outside of the North Wall when he noticed corpses lying by the public executioner. He desired to look, but at the same time he was disgusted and made himself turn away; and for a while he struggled and covered his face. But finally, overpowered by the desire, he opened his eyes wide, ran toward the corpses and said: 'Look, you damned wretches, take your fill of the fair sight.'" (Plato 1991:439d-440a)

This short story condenses the core elements of a common human experience: being powerfully and uncomfortably attracted to the suffering of other human beings. Something compels us to contemplate this suffering, whether we have it right before our eyes, or we can only guess it through the traces left (in the gestures of suffering or, as was the case for Leontius, in the dead bodies, or in photographs, or in testimonial records), or through the medium of art. This appeal is built in the core of many art forms (from tragedy to horror movies to war photography). But the pleasure that this experience can produce is aesthetically and ethically problematic: a shadow of guilt and strangeness accompanies the idea of a pleasure that requires, as its condition, the suffering of others, be it feigned or real; we suspect the effects that it may have on the spectator; it is not even clear how is it possible that we find pleasure in an experience that seems to be, at the same time, so deeply unpleasant.

Since Aristotle's theory of tragedy (Aristotle 2001), philosophers have tried once and again to explain this phenomenon. The development of mass media, which multiply the images of disasters around the globe, has made these problems even more urgent.

If one explores the history of aesthetics in search of conceptual tools to address this problem, it is almost inevitable to consider the long and convoluted discussion that elicited the "paradox of tragedy" in the eighteenth century, particularly in England and France, in the context of the rise and development of modern aesthetics. David Hume offered the classic formulation of this paradox at the beginning of his brief and much-cited essay "Of Tragedy":

It seems an unaccountable pleasure, which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions, that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy. The more they

are touched and affected, the more are they delighted with the spectacle; and as soon as the uneasy passions cease to operate, the piece is at an end. One scene of full joy and contentment and security is the utmost, that any composition of this kind can bear; and it is sure always to be the concluding one. If, in the texture of the piece, there be interwoven any scenes of satisfaction, they afford only faint gleams of pleasure, which are thrown in by way of variety, and in order to plunge the actors into deeper distress, by means of that contrast and disappointment. The whole art of the poet is employed, in rousing and supporting the compassion and indignation, the anxiety and resentment of his audience. They are pleased in proportion as they are afflicted, and never are so happy as when they employ tears, sobs, and cries to give vent to their sorrow, and relieve their heart, swoln with the tenderest sympathy and compassion. (Hume 1987:I.XXII.1)

A crowd of French and English authors offered explanations for this phenomenon, generating a critical exchange that probably began in the first decade of the eighteenth century with the publication of Joseph Addison essays on *The pleasures of the imagination*, in 1712, and reached its summit with the texts devoted to the topic by David Hume (*Of tragedy*, 1757) and Edmund Burke (*A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, also published in 1757). In this context, the contributions of Jean-Baptiste Du Bos (*Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, first published in 1719), Adam Smith (especially in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, published in 1759) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (*Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles*, published in 1759) also represent relevant positions.

What can we learn from this discussion? What lessons can we draw from it for contemporary reflection on the nature, possibilities and dangers of the artistic representation of suffering? These questions define the focus from which I analyze this debate. The primary objective of this paper is not to determine which is the best answer. I think there is a specific interest in considering what these responses, in their diversity, show with respect to the assumptions within which arises the paradox of tragedy and the limits and possibilities of this approach. In other words, my intention is to weigh the strategic value of the paradox of tragedy as a way to interrogate the role and value of our aesthetic reaction to suffering. I must

also say that I am particularly interested in the aesthetic ramifications of contemporary theories of emotions, as developed by philosophers as Noël Carroll and Martha Nussbaum. (Carroll 1990, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c; Nussbaum 2003) This interest certainly influences the assessment I make of the paradox of tragedy, although there is no space here to explicitly develop such a connection.

2. *The Prehistory of the Paradox of Tragedy*

The fact that we enjoy the representation of another person's pain was already noticed by Aristotle. The pleasure proper to tragedy, he argues, is the pleasure that derives from pity and fear (Aristotle 2001:153b 1–13), and it is deemed as such, even though these emotions are, by definition, painful. (Aristotle 2007:1382d– 22–27, 1385b 12–26) As Lucretius noticed, it is possible to feel pleasure even at the sight of the actual misfortune of others, as long as we are far enough away not to feel as if we were in danger and precisely because we are not.

What joy it is, when out at sea the stormwinds are lashing the waters, to gaze from the shore at the heavy stress some other man is enduring! Not that anyone's afflictions are in themselves a source of delight; but to realize from what troubles you yourself are free is a joy indeed. (Lucretius 1951:1–5: 60)

It is noteworthy that the ideas of Aristotle and Lucretius, while offering the conceptual framework within which the paradox of tragedy raises, and almost anticipating the solutions offered in the eighteenth century, do not consider it a paradox. For both of them the possibility that pain and pleasure coexist in the same experience is simply a given fact which does not in itself require explanation and it is rather the basis on which to build their theory. (Cf. Hathaway 1947) Although both ideas are repeated over and over in Renaissance humanism (particularly by Italian commentators of Aristotle), the paradoxical nature of this experience comes to the fore only in the eighteenth century, in the works of those authors who, like Addison, settled the foundations of modern aesthetics. It is likely that the transformation of this problem and its growing importance is due, at

least in part, to the central place that pleasure holds in the aesthetics of taste. For Addison, Du Bos, Hume, and Burke – as it will be later for most of Kantian aesthetic tradition – aesthetic judgment is always a judgment about pleasure, and the field of aesthetics (artistic and natural) is defined by a particular pleasure or displeasure that the subject may feel before the natural world or works of art. (Bozal 1999) In these conditions, it is only natural that the question of how painful phenomena produce pleasure become urgent, as only from this perspective can the eighteenth century theorists answer for its properly aesthetic dimension.

There could be a second reason for the importance that the resolution of this paradox acquires: its ethical resonances. In Eighteenth-century philosophy a deep ethical-anthropological dispute concerning the selfish or altruistic nature of man took place. Those conceptions of human nature that see man as a selfish being, whose motivation for action can only be based on calculations of gain, clash with those for which the human being is originally oriented towards virtue and altruism, so that we cannot remain indifferent to the pain of others. Tragic pleasure presupposes a motivational and aesthetic dimension of our relationship with others, and connects directly with that broader set of problems. Consequently, the solution given to the paradox of tragedy acquired immediate ethical significance in that age.

3. *The Basic Positions*

The answers to the paradox of tragedy with which we are concerned here can be grouped into four basic positions, according to the mechanism through which they explain the pleasure that a spectator can feel while witnessing the pain of others.¹

¹ Jerrold Levinson proposes the following classification of contemporary responses: compensatory explanations, conversionary explanations, organicist explanations, revisionist explanations, Deflationary explanations. (Levinson 1997:29s.) This is an interesting classification, but it's not very useful when applied to the specific set of authors we studied, as almost all of them would be covered under the first and second categories proposed by Levinson, and the differences that exist between them would be hidden. Another classification, closer to ours, was proposed by Hathaway. (Hathaway 1947)

(a) The "Secret Comparison"

As already indicated, Lucretius had noted that the enjoyment before the pain of others is conditioned by the fact of not being oneself who suffers. Thomas Hobbes took up Lucretius' example and noted that in such a case there was a mixture of pleasure and pain, emphasizing the idea that the pleasure came from the idea of our own security. (Hobbes 1840:L. IX, Sec. 19, 51s.), Thus, the situation was ripe for Joseph Addison to extend this theory to the explanation of "pleasing horror" in contemplating the troubles represented in the visual arts or in poetic descriptions:

In the like manner, when we read of torments, wounds, deaths, and dismal accidents, our pleasure does not flow so properly from the grief which such melancholy descriptions give us, as from the secret comparison which we make between our selves and the person who suffers. Such representations teach us to set a just value upon our own condition, and make us prize our good fortune, which exempts us from the like calamities. This is, however, such a kind of pleasure as we are not capable of receiving, when we see a person actually lying under the tortures that we meet with in a description; because in this case, the object presses too close upon our senses, and bears so hard upon us, that it does not give us time or leisure to reflect on our selves. Our thoughts are so intent upon the miseries of the sufferer, that we cannot turn them upon our own happiness. Whereas, on the contrary, we consider the misfortunes we read in history or poetry, either as past, or as fictitious, so that the reflection upon our selves rises in us insensibly, and over-bears the sorrow we conceive for the sufferings of the afflicted. (Addison, Steele, and Chalmers 1853:71)

According to the model proposed by Addison, pleasure in the representation of a pathetic event requires not only a sense of security, as its condition, but derives from this sense of security. The satisfaction in our own situation increases when contrasted with the poor situation of others, and we perceive this contrast through a mental act of which we are unaware (a secret comparison), but that serves to explain the visible effect that is our pleasure.

Sympathy, so important in other explanations of the paradox of tragedy, appears here only as a negative element, i.e, as a possible impediment

to pleasure. Addison believes that if there can be pleasure at the fictional images or representations of the past, but not to images of real and present events, it is because fiction and temporal distance are mechanisms that serve to block sympathy, to mitigate a too strong presence of others' pain in our own imagination and thus allow a purer enjoyment.

(b) Remedies for Boredom

Jean-Baptiste Du Bos, in his influential *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture*, was intent on explaining "the nature of this pleasure which bears so great a resemblance with affliction, and whose symptoms are sometimes as affecting as those of the deepest sorrow.' (Du Bos 1748:1) The solution he offered was relatively simple. He assumed that boredom is the worst state in which a person could find herself. We need to occupy ourselves with something, anything, and we fulfill this need even at the cost of our own welfare. The passions, even the most painful, would allow us to evade boredom in the measure in which they concentrate our attention and orient our soul towards an activity, regardless of the intrinsic value that this activity may have. For Du Bos, this theory helps to explain the appeal exerted by the most horrible spectacles (gladiatorial fights, boxing, etc.) even in the most civilized nations. Spectators run to the Colosseum to be moved and escape boredom, even if the passions that entertain them are unpleasant.

Tragic works, or in general any works representing terrible events, would offer the same kind of satisfaction: they would produce the strongest passions the human soul knows. Through sympathy, viewers would develop an immediate and non-rational connection with the passions of the characters who suffer. This, of course, can happen not only before artistic representations, but also before actual events. Artistic passions, however, have the advantage of being of a particular kind, 'ghost-passions' ('phantômes de passions'.) According to the title of section 3 of his *Réflexions*, 'The principal merit of poems and pictures consist in the imitation of such objects as would have excited real passions. The passions which those imitations give raise to, are only superficial.' (Du Bos 1748:21) Imitations affect only what Du Bos calls 'sensitive soul' without us actually coming to believe in the reality of what is imitated. 'The copy of the object ought to stir up within us a copy of the passion which the object itself would have

excited.’ (Du Bos 1748:22f.) These passions would last less, remaining in us only during the time we dedicate to the reading, viewing or listening of the work, and therefore the negative aspects that would inevitably accompany them would be more controllable. In few words, tragic artworks would have the advantage of entertaining us in a more regulated manner and with fewer side effects than actual disasters.

(c) The Alchemy of Passions

In *Of Tragedy*, Hume proposes an answer to the paradox of tragedy that in his opinion, and compared to previous theories, allows a more complete and unitary explanation of the phenomenon. The beauties of artistic representation would produce in the viewer a characteristic pleasure that sets the tone for the whole experience and appropriates the vehemence and force of painful passions.

The genius required to paint objects in a lively manner, the art employed in collecting all the pathetic circumstances, the judgment displayed in disposing them: the exercise, I say, of these noble talents, together with the force of expression, and beauty of oratorical numbers, diffuse the highest satisfaction on the audience, and excite the most delightful movements. By this means, the uneasiness of the melancholy passions is not only overpowered and effaced by something stronger of an opposite kind; but the whole impulse of those passions is converted into pleasure, and swells the delight which the eloquence raises in us. The same force of oratory, employed on an uninteresting subject, would not please half so much, or rather would appear altogether ridiculous; and the mind, being left in absolute calmness and indifference, would relish none of those beauties of imagination or expression, which, if joined to passion, give it such exquisite entertainment. The impulse or vehemence, arising from sorrow, compassion, indignation, receives a new direction from the sentiments of beauty. The latter, being the predominant emotion, seize the whole mind, and convert the former into themselves, at least tincture them so strongly as totally to alter their nature. And the soul, being, at the same time, rouzed by passion, and charmed by eloquence, feels on the whole a strong movement, which is altogether delightful. (Hume 1987:I.XXII.9)

Exactly how understand this transformation of which Hume so vaguely speaks, has been the subject of a critical which this is not the place to account for. (Budd 1991; Dadlez 2004; McIntyre 2006; Neill 1992; Yanal 1991). It is clear, however, that Hume's argument implies that there are two conditions for tragedy to produce pleasure. Firstly, that painful emotions are attenuated or weak – either by our awareness of its unreality, or because they do not concern us directly. Secondly, that a pleasant emotion overcomes unpleasant emotions and is able to take up their strength. These two are the basic conditions for his theory of the prevailing effect, which, as we can easily see, extends its scope far beyond the specific dramatic genre that is tragedy –for Hume, this seems to be a general principle of mental life. This phenomenon is not restricted to fiction, but can occur even in real life, whenever an unpleasant emotion can give strength to a dominant pleasant emotion. It may also be present in any occasion in which a tragic event, even if real, is re-presented, i.e. not directly witnessed but heard or viewed through any representational medium. It suffices that the representation is in itself a source of pleasure so great as to overcome the pain caused by our sympathetic relationship with the suffering of others. As in other cases, this sympathetic relationship becomes the limit of pleasurable experience: when we are too close to the suffering, or when the pain represented is too great to be redeemed, the whole experience is painful, and any pleasurable emotion in the representation merely gives more strength to the dominant displeasure.

(d) A Pleasure in Community

The answer to the paradox of tragedy given by Edmund Burke in his *Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* is based on his theory of sympathy and compassion. For Burke, our attraction to the misfortunes of other human beings is part of our natural constitution (given by God) as social beings: this attraction, although containing a painful element, is at bottom a pleasure, and that pleasure motivates us to attend to those places where our help may be needed.

(...) for terror is a passion which always produces delight when it does not press too close; and pity is a passion accompanied with pleasure, because it arises from love and social affection. (...) This is not an

unmixed delight, but blended with no small uneasiness. The delight we have in such things, hinders us from shunning scenes of misery; and the pain we feel prompts us to relieve ourselves in relieving those who suffer; and all this antecedent to any reasoning, by an instinct that works us to its own purposes, without our concurrence. (Burke 2008:Book 1, Sect. XIV, 42s.)

Sympathy, then, should always be considered a pleasant emotion, even when it has unpleasant emotions as its object. This framework allows Burke to offer more than a solution to the paradox of tragedy: he tries to *dissolve* it. There would be no real opposition between our reactions to real pain and our reactions to its representation, artistic or not. All that is required is that there is some distance between ourselves and the situation we contemplate, that it is possible to put ourselves in the role of spectators, to this end any kind of distance – be it physical, historical or fictional – may suffice. (Cf. Moscoso 2011:Chap. III) In every case, the blind mechanism of sympathy can explain the mixed pleasure we feel. The artistic properties of the representation would not play any role in its emergence.

As Arby Ted Siraki has shown, Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* develops a similar argument. (Cf. Siraki 2010) The only remarkable difference is that according to Smith sympathy is not an immediate movement, an instinctive reaction to the physical expression of emotions in other people. It is rather the product of the imaginary reconstruction of the situation in which the other finds him or herself, and would have as one of its constitutive elements a moment of 'approval' of the other's emotional reaction to the situation. It is imagination and not instinct that produces sympathy.

Through a different path, Rousseau arrived at a similar conclusion regarding the pleasures of sympathy. In his view, our pleasure in these occasions would come from a metaresponse: our compassion before the pain of others allows, in a self-reflective moment, a satisfaction in the moral character of this reaction. We feel good because we feel bad for others, and that reaction seems morally right – as it reassures us of our own goodness. For Rousseau, however, this serves as a basis for condemning theater, in as much as it would allow us to indulge in the pleasures of compassion without actually requiring us to act upon it: our compassion in fiction would be sterile and artificial. (Rousseau 2004:268s.)

4. Notes for a Balance

The theories sketched above differ in many points. As we have seen, each author proposes his own explanation of the source of our pleasure in the spectacle of the pain of others, why it attracts us so much, and the underlying psychological mechanisms. The pleasure is said to come from the contrast with our own situation, the artistic qualities of the representation, the simple fact that we feel occupied and active, or our recognition of the fact that we can share other people's feelings. And, despite sympathy plays an important role in many of these theories, this role isn't always the same: it may be only a source of pain or a source of both pleasure and pain. The Eighteenth century reached no consensus on which would be the right answer to this problem.

In fact, all these theories, despite their many points of conflict, coexisted for a long period of time. I think this is possible because each one of them has a certain verisimilitude, at least when applied to some of the examples of mixed pleasure and pain; and their psychological premises, even if problematic, find support in some of our many and conflicting intuitions about our psychological life. Also, none of them were able to explain, without many convolutions, all of the typical cases. As Hume noted, for Du Bos it is not easy to explain why would we prefer a state of agonizing pain to a state of pleasing calm; Burke – perhaps because of his excessively optimistic account of human nature – doesn't seem to allow the possibility that we shun real life calamities and instead turn on the TV and watch soap-operas (as many actually do), etc. None of these theories are immune to counter-examples (they are rather easy to find) which devoid them of their claim to universality. This makes it easy to understand why some authors tried to combine them all – i.e. William Richardson in his *Cursory Remarks on Tragedy* (Richardson and Taylor 1774:24s.). But of course this is an unacceptable solution that carries with it all the problems of eclecticism, inasmuch the different mechanisms proposed are, in several aspects, clearly incompatible.

One of the few points in which there seem to have been a real consensus was that experiences of this kind, with their characteristic phenomenological texture, actually take place and have a certain importance in our responses to art and life, which makes them deserving of an expla-

nation. Almost all of these theorists admitted that the phenomenon they tried to explain has its most notorious example in tragedy, but can also take place in other literary genres not usually subsumed under this category, as well as in other artistic media, like painting, in spectacles we might resist to call artistic (boxing, gladiatorial fights, or bull-fighting), or in real life (battles, natural disasters or public hangings). It seems that the 'paradox of tragedy' could also be labeled the 'paradox of negative emotions' – perhaps more precisely.

The only condition they all agree to deem necessary for the subject to experience this pleasure is that she feels safe, that there is no direct risk for her. This way, the witness can put herself in the position of an spectator, protected from the events by a distance that can be ontological, temporal, social, or just spatial. A distance this kind is a precondition for the operation of all the different psychological mechanisms suggested by authors such as Addison, Hume, Du Bos or Burke to explain this pleasure. It is noteworthy, however, that none of them seem to consider this barrier as bidirectional. Even if the events have no direct bearing on the well-being of the spectator, that doesn't mean that the spectator cannot, when dealing with real life events, take part in them and try to change them, neither it is suggested (with the possible exception of Rousseau) that this would entail a diminishing of pleasure. The position of the spectator is different from that of the sufferer, but this doesn't entail that it is incompatible with the position of the agent.

These theories suggest, then, that our aesthetic experience and our emotional connection with others in the 'real world' are not two entirely independent phenomena, even if they do have some differences. Many of the examples they present show how our emotional connection with literary – or, for that matter, painterly – characters simply develops certain elements of our everyday emotional life in somewhat altered conditions. In this sense, they don't pledge to the assumption of a radical distinction between art and life that dominated most of post-kantian aesthetic theory, an assumption that since the fall of modernism has been, again, strongly criticized. From this perspective, the wide scope of these theories can be considered a healthy reminder of the importance of considering the whole of our mental life when theorizing about aesthetics and offer abundant material to support the idea that, taken as a point of departure, a

radical distinction between art and life, tragedy and melodrama, aesthetic distance and emotional implication, obviates too many cases and leaves too many things unexplained. (Cf. Puelles Romero 2011) This, I think, is a contribution that these theories can make to contemporary aesthetics, even if we should not adopt them in their entirety.

Nonetheless, their wide scope, their ambition to unite all of these phenomena under only one explanation that covers every artistic and non-artistic case, every negative emotion, every person, seems to be one of the causes of their demise. Of course, from a theoretical point of view and all other things being equal, a unitary explanation has the recognized advantages of simplicity and elegance over an explanation that requires multiple principles and explains only some cases. But, in this case, the attempt to develop it has been shown to bring with it deep problems that don't allow us to accept any of these theories unmodified, and may suggest that an unitary account is, despite its strong appeal, not possible.

I think this is clear, for example, if we consider the importance they give to pleasure (which seems to be, from their point of view, the only reason why we are attracted to art) and contrast it with the little room they leave for taking into account the different sources and types of pleasure and the different roles it can have in our relationships with art. They all seem to consider pleasure as undefinable, as constituted only for some felt qualia. Any explanation of our relationship with art must take into account the pleasure it gives us, but it is not necessarily true that all of the pleasures in different artistic forms have the same source or even the same nature. It is also clear that this search for a general answer, as a point of departure, is inhospitable to the consideration of the differences between specific artworks and art forms, and of how they arouse and articulate specific emotions (terror, pity, sadness, etc.) (Cf. Budd 1991:106)

Also, these theories seem to see this reaction as a natural process, in which the spectator is considered as a rather abstract person, not giving much room to consider how the particular moral structure of a person or a society can affect and determine the emotional reaction to situations. Specifically, sympathy tends to be considered a natural mechanism that works automatically and irrationally – a notable exception here is Smith, who develops a very interesting connection between imagination and sympathy. In few words, the search for a unique solution tends to make them

confuse the distinctions between the natural, the cultural, and the normative. (Cf. Hathaway 1947:688) This is a flaw particularly relevant today, as the cognitive turn in the theory of the emotions, since the seventies, has shown that a theory of emotions that doesn't account for personal and cultural differences is ultimately untenable -something that even those who oppose cognitive theories of emotions have come to recognize. (Robinson 2005; de Sousa 2010) Any appraisal of these theories should come to terms with our contemporary knowledge of the emotions.

To sum up, the analysis of these positions encourages us to study this phenomenon from a perspective that takes into account the broader anthropological and ethical context of our emotional reactions to others and keeps in mind the peculiarities that involves the viewer's position (in contrast to the sufferer's position), Also, the analysis suggests that we set aside the search for a common solution and try to develop answers that account for the relevance of differences in both the cultural and normative context of emotional reactions, as well as how various genres and particular works model and structure these reactions.

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