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The beauty of tragedy

Troy Polidori[1]

Abstract

In this essay, I build on a theory of tragedy (that tragedy involves the inhospitality of the world to what matters) to explore how tragedy's beauty can be understood more robustly than through the traditional functional conceptions of tragedy from Aristotle, Hume, and others. Part of tragedy's beauty is the unique frame it places on its constituent values lost. It is only because something matters that its loss due to the world's inhospitality can be registered as tragic. This makes tragedy an indirect window into what matters. Artistic representations of tragedy can be appreciated along this measure: the unique and creative ways they represent their values lost, providing through this representation a novel and enriching perspective on what matters. How does this view of the beauty of tragedy has consequences outside the realm of aesthetics? Specifically, how do we to understand the role of the tragic emotions in real-life tragedies.

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> The supreme beauty is that of tragedy. The consciousness that everything passes away… fills us with anguish, and this anguish itself reveals to us the consolation of that which does not pass away, of the eternal, of the beautiful.
>
> (Miguel de Unamuno)[2]

Inhospitality and inescapability

I have argued that tragedy involves the world's inhospitality to what matters.[3] Tragedy is not merely a genre-form featuring heroes with tragic flaws. Nor is it simply an elegiac way of declaring an event's special badness. Tragedies occur due to the world's *inhospitality*, its subversion of what is of value.[4] Characteristically, this occurs when the world prevents the conditions adequate for the realization of what matters. Consider the fate of Sophocles' Antigone: her fate is tragic because the world (through Creon) prevents her from simultaneously fulfilling her duties to bury her brother and obey the state. Creon's dictates function inhospitably to Antigone's righteous aims.

[1] Wingate University.

[2] de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, 101.

[3] Polidori, "Tragedy as an independent real-world phenomenon," 15-25.

[4] I use the term "value" broadly and in line with its practical and everyday meaning: when something is valuable, it provides a defeasible reason for relating to it in a particular way, such as by realizing it (e.g. the content of a desire) or by recognizing that it matters in some special way (e.g. the value of persons). (cont.d)

Tragedies are thus best understood as involving a circumstantial relation between individuals and their practical world. This circumstantial relation is one of inhospitality. Hospitality is a relation between an individual and the relevant conditions of their environment. These relevant conditions together make up the individual's "practical world." A practical world is hospitable when it provides conditions adequate for the success of an individual's aims. A practical world is inhospitable when it fails to provide these conditions.

It is important to recognize that world-hospitality does not entail that practical success be as easy or efficient as possible for individuals. Reflection on the quotidian use of the term is instructive: A host is hospitable in virtue of providing the conditions for friendly relations in their home. These conditions include acts such as making dinner, providing warmth and a place to sit, and a general demeanor of friendliness. A host who spoon-feeds their guests might make the activity of eating dinner less effortful for their guests, but they would not express the virtue of hospitality. Aims require action and effort on the part of the individuals who have them. It is no tragedy that the world does not spoon-feed us our aims.

Tragedies emerge from the inhospitable conditions of the world. In order for tragedy to occur, these conditions must also be inescapable. Consider an individual who aims to become a film director, but never purchases a camera, watches films, or involves himself with other filmmakers. He would fail in his aim to become a film director, but not because of the inescapable conditions of his practical world. The failed film director is not a tragic subject because his predicament predictably arises from conditions within his control. Contrast this with an aspiring woman film director living in a context where women lack the opportunity to work behind the camera. She would be a tragic subject because the conditions of her world are inescapable. It is not within her control to prevent the failure of her aim to become a filmmaker.

The inescapability criterion captures what most conspicuously characterizes tragedies: the individual fails because their aim is at odds with the circumstances of their practical world. I may have an aim to practice playing guitar, but if I fail because I decide to read literature in my free time instead, this is not a tragedy. I have merely decided to attend to one aim over another. Since this decision does not follow from the inhospitable conditions of the practical world, it is not tragic. Contrast this with an individual with an aim to play guitar who cannot because a terrible accident has left their dominant hand disfigured. Their failure is tragic due to the inhospitable conditions of their practical world.

These examples illustrate that the mere failure of an aim is not sufficient for tragic circumstances, nor is merely having two or more aims in conflict. Tragedy emerges when practical failure is brought on by the inhospitable conditions of the world. If a photographer does not practice photography because they would rather watch television, this is not a tragedy. But if they cannot practice photography because no cameras are available, then tragic circumstances arise. This is a tragedy because the

(Footnote cont.…)
Values in this sense guide agents by providing reasons for action. In this essay, I speak in a full-throated realist tone about values because this is in line with everyday usage, and I am unconvinced that such usage is in philosophical error (in general it is best to proceed with pre-theoretical usage of terms unless it is shown to be faulty). However, the argument elucidated here can be reconstructed to fit several theories of value: that values are independent properties of things, that values follow from our reasons to do things, or that values are in some way constructed or projected by individuals or collectives. All that matters for current purposes is that there are (in some sense) valuable things that can be lost due to the world's inhospitality. For more on value realism, see FitzPatrick, "Robust ethical realism, non-naturalism, and normativity" and "Ontology for an uncompromising ethical realism."

inhospitable conditions of the practical world are inescapable.

This framework concerning the inescapability of tragic circumstances helps illuminate one of the most famous cases of tragedy from literature: Oedipus is a tragic subject not merely because he happens to kill his father and marry his mother (undoubtedly terribly accursed things to happen to someone). He is a tragic subject because the world outside of his control, a world governed by the Fates, has directed these outcomes. The inhospitable conditions of his practical world are inescapable for him. No matter what he does to avoid it, he will fail. The tragedy of Oedipus is not merely due to great suffering or the curse that follows kin-slaying and incest. It arises from the inescapability of the conditions that determine these outcomes. Tragedies in this way characterize our finitude in relation to the immensity of the world.

Tragedy, representation, and appreciation

Tragedy represents what matters. This is because tragedy involves the thwarting of what matters due to the inhospitality of the world. What is unique about tragedy is the form in which what matters is presented. Characteristically, this is through the lens of *loss*. It is tragic when we lose someone we love. Grief is the appropriate response to such loss, and it is in part a recognition of the loss. But more importantly grief is a form of *appreciation* of the beloved in response to their loss. *Loss* is the mode of presentation of the value of the individual who has died, and grief is its counterpart mode of appreciation. This distinction between mere recognition and appreciation is parallel to Susan Sontag's claim that melancholy has a "charm" that depression lacks.[5] The appreciation constitutive of grief has a charm that mere recognition of loss lacks. This charm is due to the background value appreciated through the prism of tragedy. This phenomenon is evident in the appreciation of tragic literature as well. In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus flees Corinth to avoid the Oracle's prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother. This act itself infamously sets the fulfillment of the prophecy in motion. We root for Oedipus and are dismayed at his downfall. Through this dismay, we appreciate the nobility of his intentions.

My claim in this essay is that tragedies have a kind of beauty for this reason.[6] Tragedies involve the loss of things that matter. This value, lost in tragedy, is apt for appreciation through various modes: grief, pity, compassion, sorrow. When we experience these characteristic emotional responses to tragedy, one thing we may recognize is that there is a peculiar aesthetic quality that arises. Consider an individual sacrificing themselves to save the lives of others. We may call this action beautiful because it has a particular kind of aesthetic value in addition to its more grounded moral and character values. This aesthetic value consists in the unique frame given to the presentation of the sacrificer's virtue. The beauty of the act of self-sacrifice arises due to the contrast between the tragic frame of the event and the non-aesthetic value of the individual's virtuous character. This contrast makes the underlying non-aesthetic value shine out in a way that's

[5] Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 50. Sontag contrasts depression and melancholy here, claiming that melancholy (associated with tuberculosis) has a charm that depression (associated with TB's modern equivalent in terms of pervasiveness, cancer) lacks.

[6] I use "beauty" here and throughout broadly in reference to the aesthetic qualities that characteristically function to give rise to the aesthetic emotions such as awe, fascination, and boredom, as well as to aesthetic judgments (e.g. according to relevant aesthetic norms of excellence). Although I consider these qualities to be features of the objects in which they inhere, this is not ultimately necessary for the view elucidated in this essay.

apt for aesthetic appreciation, in addition to more general admiration.

This phenomenon is pervasive in tragic art. Consider Sally Rooney's 2018 novel, *Normal People*.[7] The lead characters in the novel, Connell and Marianne, are doomed young lovers. Their intimate relationship binds them together and transforms them, drawing out parts of themselves that otherwise would remain dormant.[8] But it is clear from the beginning that their romantic bond is destructive. The recognition that a love story is doomed to a tragic fate is beautiful in part because the tragic frame contrasts so starkly with the underlying value of the relationship. This contrast illuminates the value of the relationship, making clear that its value transcends simple calculations of well-being: it may well be worth it even if it is doomed to misery and failure. Tragic beauty here is an epistemic window in the nature of the non-aesthetic value grounding it. If tragedies involve the loss of things that matter, then experience of them is a lens through which we can understand and appreciate what matters. Tragedy's uniqueness is that this frame, in virtue of the sharp contrast with what it presents, can become an object of aesthetic appreciation.[9]

Beginning with Aristotle, the function of tragedy has been understood somewhat differently, as a cathartic *purging*. The experience of the negative emotions associated with representations of tragedy (distress, compassion, fear, pity) are due to vicarious identification with the tragic hero.[10] This identification functions to facilitate the expression (or *release*) of these emotions absent their usual causes. This purging is typically framed as having virtuous effects. We might, in the spirit of ancient Greek tragedy, be humbled before the power of the gods. In contemporary contexts, we might take moral lessons from tragedy. A narrative depiction of the loss of a loved one might strike a compassionate chord in us. Once provoked, compassion may lead us to redouble our commitment to those we love before they're gone.

All of this rings true in part. It ought to be kept in mind, however, that formal or narrowly functionalist conceptions are sometimes misguided if they purport to be exhaustive accounts of real-world phenomena. Tragedy involves the world's inhospitality to what matters. It is not merely a literary form, nor must its recognition function in a specific way for it to be tragic. Rather, tragedy warrants certain types of recognition and appreciation due to its nature. One feature the catharsis account obscures is how tragedy is *a presentation of value*. This is what it means to claim that tragedy gives unique form to what matters. When we recognize something as tragic, we indirectly recognize the value of what is lost. This recognition of loss is not typically an indifferent judgment, however. It also involves a kind of *appreciation*. In many cases, we do not merely recognize what matters in tragic loss, we appreciate its value in a unique way. This distinction between mere recognition and appreciation is analogous to the difference between knowing that something tastes good and tasting its goodness. Appreciation has an experiential or phenomenological component that gives it its character. This is because appreciation is a subjective mode of presentation of value to an individual. When we feel compassion for Oedipus, we not only know that his fate is tragic. Its tragic character and the nobility of Oedi-

[7] Rooney, *Normal People*.
[8] This articulation of their relationship rhymes with Talbot Brewer's characterization of the dialectical activity of Aristotelian "character friendship." See Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics*, Ch. 7.
[9] This is the grain of truth in Nietzsche's remark: "There is no such thing as pessimistic art. Art affirms. Job affirms." See Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 435.
[10] Aristotle, *Poetics*, Book XIII.

pus' intentions are presented to us *through* our feeling it.

That at least some emotions are representational is not philosophical news.[11] I do not stake a claim here on whether emotions are in fact perception-like representations, or whether in every case they are *evaluative* representations.[12] My claim is that the representational nature of emotions at least sometimes facilitates appreciation of the emotion's target object value. For instance, we might experience excitement as a way of appreciating some desired future event. Or we might feel gratitude as an appreciation of a kind act a friend has done for us. Less discussed is how negative emotions function as forms of appreciation.[13] When someone insults us, we might feel angry. It is not as obvious how anger is a form of appreciation as, say, when we have affection for someone we love. This is because anger's form of appreciation is indirect. When we're angry about being insulted, we indirectly appreciate the value of our honor or reputation. This process is clearer in cases of another negative emotion: envy. When we envy someone, we appreciate the value of something that's theirs, like their new job or new relationship. Compassion and pity are similar: When we have compassion for someone, we not only recognize that things have gone badly for them. We also indirectly appreciate their value, and the value of their well-being, through the *disvalue* of their circumstances. It only matters that things have gone badly for them because they matter.[14]

The genesis of these thoughts regarding the value of the negative emotions is found in William James' reflections on the "sick soul." The sick soul, more sensitive to the sources of melancholy and grief than the "healthy-minded," is rewarded with greater insight into life:

> What are we to say of this quarrel? It seems to me that we are bound to say that morbid-mindedness ranges over the wider scale of experience, and that its survey is the one that overlaps. The method of averting one's attention from evil, and living simply in the light of good is splendid as long as it will work. It will work with many persons; it will work far more generally than most of us are ready to suppose; and within the sphere of its successful operation there is nothing to be said against it as a religious solution. But it breaks down impotently as soon as melancholy comes; and even though one be quite free from melancholy one's self, there is no doubt that healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth.[15]

James begins this passage by speaking mainly of the practical value of the sick soul's negative emotions. Living simply in the light of the

[11] See de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* for an account of the representational nature of emotions. For an account of emotions as perceptual experiences of value, see Tappolet, *Emotions, Value, and Agency*.
[12] For a review of this debate, see Schroeter, Schroeter and Jones, "Do emotions represent values?"
[13] That negative emotions can function as forms of appreciation is indebted to, but should ultimately be distinguished from, accounts of the practical value of negative emotions. For examples of the latter, see Thomason, *Dancing with the Devil: why bad feelings make life good* and Alessandri, *Night Vision: seeing ourselves through dark moods.*
[14] This can be heard as a partial inverse of David Velleman's maxim: "[W]hat's good for a person is worth caring about… only insofar as he is worth caring about." What's bad for a person is worth caring about *(is a tragedy)* only insofar as they are worth caring about. See Velleman, "A right to self-termination?," 611.
[15] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 130.

good loses its practical value when melancholy comes, and the sick soul now has the advantage of making sense of life's misfortunes. However, the end of the passage moves on to the philosophical value of the sick soul's vantage point: it accounts for a portion of reality the happy-minded soul ignores, and most crucially, it is the "key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth." The pragmatist James focuses still on practical value when elucidating "significance" and "truth." But the point delves deeper: the philosophical truth that the negative emotions open our eyes to is the value constitutive of *loss*. Something can be a *loss* only if it matters. Importantly, this point grounds the practical value of the negative emotions James centers on: it is *because* the lost one matters that grief responds truthfully and appreciatively, and *this* is why grief has its practical value, helping us to normalize in its wake.

This appreciation of value through negative emotions is one component of appreciating tragedy. Tragedies don't merely make us feel bad. They make us feel bad *for* and *about* something that matters. These feelings function to both represent and appreciate. Consider an athlete who suffers a devastating injury shortly before competing in a prestigious tournament. When we have compassion for the athlete, we don't merely feel bad. Compassion both represents and appreciates that what they've lost, the chance to compete at a high level, matters. Compare this to an individual who enjoys some pathological activity we are unlikely to think matters, like counting blades of grass for its own sake. If a drought kills the grass, we are unlikely to feel compassion for this loss if we don't recognize grass-counting as mattering. Instead, we might feel pity, but this would be directed at the individual's misguided understanding of what matters.[16]

There are several beneficial consequences of this view of the appreciative aspect of the tragic emotions. Some of these are relevant to the appreciation of artistic representations of tragedy. This includes how indirect value-appreciation helps explain why we find tragic art beautiful despite its disfavorable content. Another is how it fits harmoniously with the traditional account of cathartic purging, supplementing its explanatory weaknesses. I explore each of these in the next section before concluding with some brief observations concerning judgments about real-life tragedy.

Artistic representations of tragedy

In this section, I argue that tragic art involves representation of what matters. This evaluative representation may be implied by the traditional functionalist accounts of tragedy deriving from Hume, Aristotle, and others, but it is not central to their explanations of tragedy's function. I briefly elaborate on the role of evaluative representation in tragic art, and how it helps explain one way we find tragedy to be beautiful: namely, because the tragic frame functions as a sharp contrast which illuminates its subject value.

David Hume, in his short essay *Of Tragedy*, asks why it is that we derive pleasure from tragedy depicted in art when, were the same events to occur in real life, they would excite only negative emotions.[17] Hume's answer is that the negative emotions roused by tragedy are *converted* into pleasure through: 1) Recognition that the artistic object is a fiction, softening the negative emotions, and 2) Pleasure derived from the aesthetic properties of the tragic form

[16] In other words, this point should be distinguished from feeling compassion for them due to their pathological desires. This is a compassion that is directed at the value of the individual, not the loss of a valuable activity. The example of grass-counting comes from Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 379.
[17] Hume, "Of tragedy," 217.

(oratory, verse, etc.). These aesthetic pleasures overpower and transform the negative emotions into positive ones.[18] This is what distinguishes tragic sorrow from real sorrow: real sorrow cannot be transformed into pleasure, it can only wane over time. Tragic sorrow is transformed into pleasure because the events depicted are imitations with aesthetic properties that real events do not have.

Aristotle's explanation of tragic pleasure derives from his understanding of the function of the tragic form. Aristotle claims that tragedies must have a specific narrative form: a change of fortune from good to bad of a relatively noble individual through frailty or errors of judgment. This is because this narrative form elicits pity and fear in the audience. The downfall of a villain stokes the moral sense, but neither pity nor fear. Fear is registered only if the hero is someone we can imagine ourselves to be. Pity is generated only if the hero is someone with whom we sympathize. The hero's downfall must be due not to vice, but to some inner flaw or unforeseen mistake. This is to ensure that we maintain our sympathetic stance toward their plight.

Tragic pleasure is derived, according to Aristotle, from a *purging* of pity and fear that takes place in the audience. When we witness the unmerited misfortune of the hero, our negative emotions undergo *catharsis*: they are released or expunged in the safe domain of the theater. This purging of negative emotions allows us to leave the theater feeling renewed, knowing that the events witnessed have not actually taken place. Some interpretations of catharsis argue that this sense of renewal is moral in nature, as we take from the downfall of the tragic hero moral lessons not to tempt fate or the gods.[19]

These explanations of tragic pleasure focus on tragedy's function: to elicit negative emotions like pity and fear and to in some way transform them into pleasure. What these explanations obscure, however, are the representational capacities that allow this function to take place. One capacity implied by both Hume and Aristotle is the cognitive representation of value. According to Hume, tragic pleasure is only possible because of the representation of the aesthetic value of the artistic form. In Aristotle's view, the tragic hero must be represented as at least more virtuous than vicious. In both, disfavorable events are contrasted sharply with the favorable events preceding them. Each of these requires the spectator to engage in some form of evaluative representation: whether of events, individual character, or artistic form.

Evaluative representation is thus one of the mechanisms that generates tragic pleasure. This exercise of evaluative representation leaves open a complementary explanation for tragic pleasure: when we feel pleasure about a tragedy, this is in part because the tragedy provides a unique frame for recognizing and appreciating the values involved. What is unique about tragedy is that these values are presented indirectly or through mediation. It is through the prism of their loss that we appreciate the values presented in a tragedy. This is in contrast with the beauty of the tragic form itself (rhyme, meter, plot), which is directly appreciated. When we experience the tragic emotions at the end of a novel, play, or film, this is in part a recognition and appreciation of value mediated through the vicarious experience of its loss.

One strength of this view is that it is complementary, and not in competition, with the traditional functionalist explanations of tragic pleasure. Aristotle is likely wrong that tragedies need to have heroes with tragic flaws, as is clear from the example of Antigone. But

[18] *Ibid.,* 218.

[19] This is G.E. Lessing's view. See his 1756-57 Correspondence on Tragedy with Mendelssohn and Nicolai, known as *Briefwechsel über das Trauerspiel.*

the general thrust of his account, that spectators must sympathize with the plight of the tragic hero and that this requires their aims to be relatively virtuous, can be partially maintained.[20] Aristotle's explanation for this is that the downfall of only a virtuous hero elicits the tragic feelings of pity and fear. But why think this?

Pity is evoked in us at the downfall of the tragic hero because we recognize that their pursuits matter. When the world's inhospitality subverts what matters, this elicits compassion because compassion represents loss of value. This is what distinguishes compassion from mere distress. Antigone's anguish at Creon's mandate not to bury her brother stokes these feelings not merely because we would feel pain were we in her place. It provokes compassion because we know her mission is virtuous and her disastrous plight is unmerited. In feeling compassion, we indirectly represent these values within tragedy's unique frame of reference.

This view of Antigone's righteous moral concern may seem to contrast with Lacan's view of the beauty of Antigone in *Seminar VII: The ethics of psychoanalysis*. Lacan states that Antigone's beauty is due to her unyielding fidelity to her desire, and her refusal to cede this desire to the "service of goods," Lacan's term for a morality which subordinates desire to an external and impersonal moral authority.[21] However, there is no need to understand *value* or *mattering* in this purely external, impersonal sense. Antigone clearly does not view Polynices merely as an external good to which she must offer disinterested service, but as something sacred warranting appropriate recognition. Todd McGowan contrasts this sacral property with the calculating morality of the capitalist market economy, where everything has a value that is commodified and exchangeable.[22] While Antigone predates capitalist relations by millennia, it is a cousin of this understanding of value that she rejects. This is why Lacan connects Antigone to the sublime function of beauty with her "unbearable splendor."[23] Antigone is both beautiful and terrible because she is the ethical subject who elevates what matters over mundane calculations of exchange-value, even under the knowing threat of her demise. That Antigone considers Polynices something sacred *to her*, and not an exchangeable good, in no way diminishes the point being drawn. When we have compassion for Antigone, we represent not only her mission as virtuous, but its virtue as grounded in the sacred value she herself is driven by. We see the loss of Polynices through her eyes, the prism through which the sacred value of the beloved is magnified.

A second virtue of this view is that it helps explain why we find tragedies beautiful despite their disfavorable content. Hume argued that the beauty of tragedy consists in its formal aesthetic features. These features, rousing oratory or graceful and elegant tone, provoke pleasure in us, and this pleasure is what overpowers and transforms the pain of tragic events. There is

[20] A similar example follows from consideration of Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Benjamin argued that the German *trauerspiel* following the wars of the 17th century represented a clean break from the mytho-poetic, determined narratives of ancient Greek tragedy. This is because the former breaks from the universal ethics of the latter in favor of a tragic representation of history constituted by mutability, melancholy, and transience. Benjamin is right to point out these contrasts between Greek tragedy and the German mourning plays of the 17th century. However, part of the utility of the view elucidated here is that *both* of these forms of tragedy are captured: the *trauerspiel* are tragedies because they represent the values lost due to the eternal transience of historical movement, represented well by Benjamin's focus on the litany of historical lost causes. Likewise, the downfall of the tragic hero is but one way that values can be represented as lost and appreciated as such.

[21] Lacan, *Seminar VII: The ethics of psychoanalysis*, 303.

[22] McGowan, "Ethics amid commodities: das ding and the origin of value," 93.

[23] Lacan, 247.

no reason to deny that tragedy's aesthetic features play something like this role. But the explanation of tragic beauty goes deeper than aesthetic form. Tragic beauty has its roots also in the values it represents.

Consider Michel Gondry and Charlie Kaufmann's great American tragedy *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. In the denouement of the film, Joel and Clementine's romance is revealed to iterate a doomed cycle of infatuation leading to immiseration. This reveal is beautiful on purely formal grounds: it shocks and surprises us while simultaneously making sense of everything that came before (Aristotle's summation of a good drama).[24] But this is entirely too formal to be an exhaustive account of the film's beauty.[25] In addition to its formal aesthetic features, the climax of the film puts a unique frame on the special value its world centers around: intimate romantic love. The film asks its audience to consider the significance of this kind of love, and whether it is worth pursuing even if it is ultimately doomed. That this value shines through within the frame of inevitable doom illustrates the unique power of the tragic representation of value. The contrast between disfavorable frame and favorable subject creates a unique mode for appreciating the latter. It does this by allowing the subject value to be appreciated through the vicarious experience of its loss. The tragic beauty of *Eternal Sunshine* is not entirely due to its formal features, but also to its distinctive representation of the value of intimate romantic love. This aspect of its value, that it may be worth pursuing even amidst great suffering, is something that can only be presented in a context where it is framed by severe misfortune. What matters shines like a jewel, becoming ever more illuminated when its setting is sharply incongruous, like the vibrancy of highly contrasting colors.[26]

I have argued that artistic representations of tragedy involve evaluative representation of what matters. This representation helps explain why the traditional functions of tragic art (evoking pity, providing moral guidance) work the way they do, and additionally provides new insight into the beauty of tragedy. Tragic art is beautiful in part because it provides a sharply contrasting but illuminative frame for its central values. This is neither a transformation of pain into pleasure, nor a combination of distinct pleasures. It is instead a singular presentation of value illuminated through a sharply contrasting frame.[27] In the final section, I briefly explore the implications of this view for understanding real-life tragedies.

Concluding postscript on real-life tragedy

I have argued that artistic representations of tragedy can be appreciated through the novel

[24] See Aristotle, *Poetics*, Book X.

[25] It is a testament to the film's greatness that it is beloved by film critics and regular moviegoers alike. This is unlikely to be explained entirely by the features only film critics specialize in evaluating.

[26] Similar reflections are warranted, I think, about popular music made under the cloud of tragedy. Consider albums released posthumously or in the lead up to a musician's death, such as David Bowie's *Blackstar*, Elliott Smith's *From a Basement on the Hill*, or Nick Drake's *Pink Moon*. Each of these albums takes on new significance when the listener learns of the events surrounding its making. These events provide a kind of *tragic prism* through which to experience the art, a frame which allows the underlying values present in the music to be newly illuminated. We don't merely "top-up" sadness at a beloved figure's death with the emotions generated by the music. These elements interact in a way that changes the nature of the aesthetic experience altogether.

[27] Richard Eldridge argues against a mechanistic view of art, where it is understood as consisting in mere appearances of pleasure and pain, thusly: "When we seek to reach some understanding of the mind and its place in culture and nature, then tragic representations have some claim to being regarded as the most illusion-free representations of reality." See Eldridge, "How can tragedy matter for us?," 164.

presentation of their constituent values. It might initially seem strange to think that this claim has any bearing on real-life tragedies. This is because real-life tragedies aren't the kind of thing we think of as objects of appreciation. Tragic literature and theater, by contrast, are apt for appreciation. They are meant to be evaluated as artistic objects, as good or bad according to the aesthetic norms of their given artistic domain. Imagine someone who approaches a real-life tragedy in this manner, elevating its aesthetic features to attention over its real-life impact on individuals: we would likely consider this individual to have at best made a category mistake, and at worst be seriously deranged.[28]

The sense in which appreciation of artistic representations of tragedy provides insight into real-life tragedy is not like this, however. We don't appreciate real-life tragedies like artistic objects because they aren't intentional creations apt for appreciation according to aesthetic norms. But there is something about the way we appreciate artistic tragedies that overlaps with how we understand and experience tragedy in real life. This has to do with the fact that real-life tragedies are, like tragic art, windows into what matters.[29] When something in real life is tragically lost, we experience the characteristic emotions of distress, pity, fear, and regret. These emotions have representational content. In tragic contexts, this representational content is also *evaluative*: it registers the content as valuable, as mattering.

Consider a long-married couple whose happy union is ruined by sudden illness and death. When the widower feels anguish and distress at this tragedy, these emotions represent the value of the marriage and the beloved. This is why these emotions are likely to spur and be spurred on by reflection on the marriage's many happy occasions. These reflections are not artistic appreciations. They are unlikely to involve the formal aesthetic features of the marriage. But they are appreciations of a different sort: They not only represent the marriage as valuable, but appreciate this value *through* the tragic emotions. Recall that appreciations have an experiential component in addition to their representational and evaluative functions. They are, again, analogous to tasting the goodness of a dish in contrast to merely knowing that it tastes good. This is because appreciation is a subjective mode of presentation of value to an individual. What is unique about tragedy is the way its form of appreciation is mediated: we appreciate the value of what is lost through experiencing negative emotions like distress, regret, and pity.

A characteristic emotion associated with tragedy is *grief*. When a loved one dies, we grieve their loss. Grief has many culturally specific forms, but it often consists of ritualized public gatherings, reflection on shared memories, and the public display of emotions, in addition to the individual experience of intense sadness. One obvious benefit of the grieving process is that it helps us normalize after tragic loss. Normalization occurs in part through reinforcing existing social bonds through public ritual. It also occurs through the purging of emotion that occurs during an episode of despair. Think of references to a "good cry." Its goodness is relative to the normalization function, not a reflection of how it feels in the moment.

Reflection on the normalization function makes it clear that grief has representational

[28] There is a connection here to Walter Benjamin's claim that fascism engages in the "aestheticization of politics." Part of what is so grotesque about fascism is its elevation of aesthetics over the more grounded values of well-being, equality, etc. For more, see Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.

[29] This is related to but distinct from the sense in which values like compassion and perseverance can only be fully understood through their tragic conditions. The latter is a species of the general claim that all tragedies are windows into their constituent values.

and evaluative elements. When we grieve the loss of a loved one, we represent them, things about them, events in their lives, and how they made us feel.[30] These representations are also characteristically evaluative. We grieve losses because the ones lost matter. This does not mean that grief only occurs for those we unreservedly love. Grief at the loss of unbeloved intimates makes sense in part because persons matter-as-such. When we grieve, we are not making absolute evaluative judgments in the positive register. Grief registers that the thing lost matters, even if its loss is good or beneficial in some other way.

Like tragic art, then, grief has representational and evaluative content. Akin to tragic art's purging function, grief functions to normalize: it involves going through the ritual form of the process, making the representations and evaluations, and experiencing the characteristic negative emotions. But parallel to the argument above concerning tragic art, this does not provide the full picture of grief. This is because the normalization function is not exhaustive of grief. Grief is additionally a form of *appreciation* of its object. When we grieve someone's loss, we do not merely represent them as mattering. This can be done disinterestedly. Grief involves commitment. Grief does not merely represent that something matters, it registers that something matters *to us*. This difference between mattering and mattering-to is what grounds the appreciative element of grief. Engaging in public ritual and sharing memories of the beloved don't just help us normalize in the wake of loss. They function as forms of appreciation of what has been lost that *take up the slack* for the normal forms of appreciation no longer available. Crucially, this appreciative element helps explain why the normalization function works in the first place: it is because public rituals and sharing memories are forms of appreciation that they help us process our emotions and reestablish our social bonds. This is why funerals can fail to help us normalize if they don't function as forms of appreciation. Think of the cinematic trope of the funeral attended only by a protagonist and disinterested functionaries: the ritual fails insofar as it fails to realize its appreciative function.[31]

To help make this case, consider a thought experiment. Imagine a pharmaceutical method is developed that precisely mimics the neurochemical process underlying the experience of grief. This pill performs its function entirely unconsciously during a single night while the individual is asleep. When they awaken the next morning, they will feel exactly as if they had undergone whichever ritual processes are dominant for processing grief in their culture. The normalization process of grief is achieved without the pain and distress that comes with actual grieving.

If such a pill were available, it need not be irrational to want to take it. Grief is hard, and it is often difficult to see the way out when caught in its hold. The question is not whether taking the pill is rational, but whether it is possible to mimic grief in this way. If grief consists only of its normalization function, then this might be possible. This is because the normalization function can be understood algorithmically as an operation on an input to produce an output. When we wake up feeling

[30] Jonathan Lear explains that this form of remembering functions to "turn mere change into loss." Lear's focus is on how grief begins with the imagination being activated, and how the imagination acts to make meaning from mere change. I take this reflection in a slightly different direction: mere change becomes loss when the evaluative and appreciative functions of grief are activated. For more, see Lear, *Imagining the End*, 12.

[31] It might be countered that professional mourners exist in many cultures and that this speaks against the claim that funerals must meet a threshold of appreciation to be successful. However, it should be noted that professional mourners function to model public displays of grief for actual grievers, releasing them from some of the burden of grief's social responsibility. Professional mourners do not characteristically replace actual grievers.

refreshed after an unconscious dark night of the soul, we might be led to think this has been accomplished. But this is absurd. Grief cannot be approximated this way. This is due to grief's appreciative element. Appreciations have an experiential element in addition to their cognitive-representational content. Perhaps the latter can be approximated neurochemically (although the philosophical jury is still out on that), but the experiential element of grief cannot. We must *feel* the sadness, the dullness, whichever emotional form grief takes. These experiential episodes must occur because it is in these episodes that grief's appreciative element is realized. Without some version of these experiences, we cannot be said to have *grieved* at all. This is why we consider ritual practices like funerals to be so important as culturally specific realizations of grief. They provide a concrete form and context for these appreciations to take and in which to take place. Funerals are often said to be more for the living than for the dead. But they are also known to be a way of honoring the dead: a body unburied is often thought to be disrespectful *to* the dead person. These senses in which funerals are both for the living and the dead can be reconciled through these reflections on grief: when we grieve, we do it for them as much as we do it for ourselves. The sense in which we do it for them is *how* we do it for ourselves: appreciation honors the dead and gives form to grief.

Real-life tragedy does not share with tragic art its formal aesthetic features. But it does share with tragic art an appreciative element. This is the sense in which real-life tragedies are opportunities for appreciation. If something is tragically lost, then it matters. This means that recognizing tragedy entails acknowledging what matters. Something that matters has a value that can be appreciated. When something is appreciated, its value is subjectively presented to the individual, usually through an emotional register. In tragedy, these emotions are characteristically sadness, regret, pity, and fear. When we experience these feelings, part of their function is to appreciate the value of what has been lost. Real-life tragedies are not beautiful in all of the ways that tragic art can be. But part of what makes tragic art beautiful, its novel presentation of its constituent values, exists in a parallel way in real-life tragedy. In both, we appreciate what matters through the prism of its loss. In this way, real-life tragedy can be beautiful by providing a contrasting frame that allows what matters to shine through magnificently. This beauty is not tragedy's core feature, and it rarely rises to attention over more salient features in contexts of great loss. But if we step back and squint our eyes at our own experience, the tragic frame comes into view. A life devoid of this recognition, focused solely on direct appreciation of what matters, is unlikely to nobly suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. It will sometimes face the same paralyzing fate as one who gazes directly at the sun. Tragedy's aesthetic features may be borrowed from its constituent values, but like the reflective light of the moon, its beauty is singular.

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