NIETZSCHE AND THE PARADOX OF TRAGEDY

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The classical tragedies by Sophocles and Aeschylus abound with highly unpleasant, often painful events and situations: injustice, wanton cruelty, loss, despair, and death. Almost equally unpleasant are the feelings of fear and pity they stir up in the viewers. To an outsider, the intensity of these feelings must make the staging of one of the great tragic plays seem like an ordeal. Nevertheless, they have been enjoyed time and again by audiences who evidently found some pleasure or use in witnessing such negativity. This apparent paradox has mystified philosophers throughout the ages. Why are we drawn to artistic representations of the negative sides of life? The question also applies to tragic content in literature or film, and even to non-representational music written in a minor key or containing harsh dissonants; but to Friedrich Nietzsche, it bore a much broader relevance, as I will try to show. I will briefly explain the views of Aristotle, Schopenhauer and David Hume on the ‘paradox of tragedy’, before turning to Nietzsche’s remarkable answer.

Aristotle, Schopenhauer, and Hume on tragedy

According to Aristotle, audiences sit through the unfolding and climax of a tragic story to periodically purge themselves of their negative feelings in a cathartic release, a thunderstorm to clear their emotional skies. This theory is evidently based on a conviction that the negative side of life should, and to a large extent can, be shunned, although its accretion over time in feelings like pity and fear is inevitable. But with regular cathartic treatments, we can lead our lives relatively free from these undesirable elements. I should mention that this widely accepted ‘psychoanalytic’ or ‘therapeutic’ interpretation of a short passage in Aristotle’s Poetics is actually the subject of great controversy; it was developed mainly by the influential nineteenth-century philologist Jakob Bernays. Aristotle’s original text allows for several other readings, but since Bernays’s version was apparently taken up by Nietzsche as representative of Aristotle’s views on tragedy, I will do the same here
for simplicity’s sake.1 Judged by these views, Aristotle seems fairly optimistic. Although pain is unavoidable, it is not essential to a successful existence; it can be remedied and thus kept under the surface. Life is worth living insofar as it manages to suppress the negative.

Schopenhauer’s pessimism takes up this logic and uses it to argue the contrary. If our existence is essentially sorrowful and pain cannot be avoided, human life simply is not worth living. All we can do is try to resign ourselves to our unfortunate condition. And that, according to Schopenhauer, is why tragedy is a useful art form: it is an exercise in resignation. By witnessing the losing battle of a tragic hero, we share the relief of his renunciation, a very pale form of pleasure. But more importantly, we learn to abandon our own futile desires and accept the inevitable defeat of our every endeavor. Tragedy reveals to us the true nature of the world and our existence, governed by “wickedness, injustice and the scornful mastery of chance,” so that this knowledge may “work as a quietener of the will,” neutralise our “once so powerful motives” and “produce resignation,” mercifully delivering us from our will to live.2 This is the best we can hope for in life: to find relative peace in the enduring sorrow that is our fate, slightly comforted by the knowledge that every other course of action would only result in disappointment and more sorrow. Like Aristotle’s theory of catharsis, Schopenhauer’s account of tragic pleasure is ultimately about the reduction of pain and misery.

To my knowledge, David Hume’s dissertation “Of Tragedy” is never mentioned by Nietzsche, which means that he may not have read it. Still, it fits in well here since Hume too tries to tackle the tragic paradox, in a way typical of eighteenth and nineteenth century views. It will serve to illustrate how Nietzsche deviated from this heritage, and also what he retained from it.

Essentially, Hume claims that our pleasure in the artistic spectacle of the play overshadows and converts any unpleasant feelings we may otherwise have felt. Aesthetic beauty defines the whole experience: we see no real cruelty, no suffering; only a good storyline, eloquent

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1 Bernays’ reading of Aristotle’s theory of tragedy is referred to in Nietzsche’s Nachlass, Winter 1869–70 / Frühjahr 1870, 3 [38] in Nietzsche, Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin, 1980), vol. 7, p. 71. This edition is henceforth cited as KSA. Moreover, Bernays is paraphrased in several passages throughout Die Geburt der Tragödie and later works.