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# Reconciliation and Harmony: The Philosophical Art of Tragic Drama

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**Reconciliation and Harmony:  
The Philosophical Art of Tragic Drama**

--Lawrence Kimmel

Prefatory Remark

In the performance of art one can begin at the beginning, but in a discussion of art one must begin somewhere in the middle. Here, it is with the conviction that art, in whatever form, though it may surprise the sense and quicken the spirit, disturb our thinking or revoke a thoughtless ease, still, its full expression restores a sense of presence and wholeness to our being. That is, every art form has a point of closure in a harmony of the spirit. Even tragic drama, which brings the darkness of human character into a glare of recognition and acceptance, must find harmonic resolution, or fail as art. In this paper I will focus on the *idea* of classical tragic drama, the sense in which it discovers and reflects the convergence of possibility and inevitability in human life and world. It will be my claim that a primary aim of tragic art, paradoxically, is to reconcile the human being to his nature and to the world of his making. This mode of reconciliation fits a larger pattern and task for the whole of the fine arts: to disclose and create a harmony of Man and World.

I

The poet's expression "All the world's a stage..." wherein we its actors have our roles to play, does more than suggest a reason for the universal access and enduring response to Shakespeare's drama. The claim strikes a common chord of agreement that does not depend on poetic license—it seems less a metaphor than a simple fact. In Shakespeare's work, this world/stage metaphor creates a space in time for the comic and tragic strife and stridings of kings and knaves, wisemen and fools. Our lives and language seldom live up to the dark splendor of the poet's tragic heroes and villains, but we recognize with a certainty of heritage the poor player who frets and struts his hour upon the stage. Shakespeare's extended metaphor, stretched by the regularity of its use, loses its figurative force to become an obvious truth: Yes, we *are* like that, and all our yesterdays but light the way to dusty death. Metaphors of world and stage, life and

drama are staples of the world of literature within the world of the arts, and further, within the world of our shared ordinary lives.

The boundaries of the many worlds we inhabit are not enclosed concentric circles, but circles that overlap in their different dramatic spaces. But there is an insistent notion--both popular and philosophical--that a more comprehensive account needs to be given for the boundaries and substance of the *real* world. Is the boundary of this other, single, final world the totality of shared experience? Or the totality of *possible* experience, whatever that might be? A sensible way to address these questions is to acknowledge that “the real world” is also a metaphor, which leaves its meaning indeterminate and open to a range of viable interpretations. That means, in turn, that the boundaries of any alleged “real” world are the variable limits of human imagination. Wittgenstein, in his curiously mystical *tractatus* on philosophical logic, began with the proposition that “The world is the totality, not of things, but of facts.” The world of his reference is the scientific world in which “The world is everything that is the case”—that is, the totality of true propositions. But the world in which we live and dream, rejoice and despair—the *lebenswelt*—has no such limits. If there are boundaries to this life-field, they are temporary and moveable bounds discovered in the creative and sharable domain of the arts.

There is both a real and fictive sense in which the drama of our lives is played out on the world’s stage, or on the many stages of the world. Nor are the boundaries set between dramatic play and real life. To think of oneself as having a life, of living in and sharing a world, to think of this life as coherent, as constituting a story, already requires an aesthetic frame of metaphor. Life and language, labor and literature are all domains and activities that mutually create and sustain. Forms of art and genres of literature mark perspectives through which the staged drama of human being can be conceived.

## II

In what sense do the arts constitute and effect a harmony—of perception, of sense, of imagination? Harmony is an internal value to the arts; it is also an affective goal of the arts, to bring Man and World, life and thought, into accord. However natural the original impulse to art—the contemporary child at play in the yard, the ancient

Lascaux hunters in the shadows of their caves—the fine arts now clearly enlist freedom as an essential value, a release from the routine functions of our lives. The appeal of beauty in the experience of art calls for a suspension of the ordinary business of living, a release from the imperatives of survival, the projects of progress. We accept an invitation and fall instead, if only for a moment, into the glory of the sunrise as if we ourselves had somehow accomplished it, or into a fleeting fantasy that it was done specially for us. How could the gods not continue their concern through such acts, having first given us the gift to perceive the world in this way? Our minds do not struggle to make such an overarching picture; the sense of harmony comes of its own. The rooster must have a similar sense in his response each morning to the rebirth of the day.

The natural wonder of the world requires no willing suspension of disbelief. Beauty, in the unadorned context of life and world, is more like an impulse of belief, of spontaneous surprise and wonder. We take delight in the things we see and hear: a color becomes an image, a sound a melodic line, several sounds a chord, and the whole resolves into a harmony in the freedom of time, in the distance of unhurried reflection. The development of perspective in the language of perception extends to metaphor, which becomes a line of poetry, which reconnects with image and sound, vision and melody, the harmony of Man and World. It is not difficult in this way to complete the circle and provide a lyrical appeal and expression for a natural harmony. The trouble begins when we try to substitute, instead, a detailed explanation. Then we require analytic arguments, and the effort itself seems to betray the initial impulse that gave life to the idea. Even so, let us make a try at putting the lyrical idea into some kind of cognitive frame, to put the vision of the arts into the language and perspective of philosophy.

When I was a child I recall hearing an adult conversation in which it was remarked or reported that the expression “cellar door” was the most beautiful sound in the English language. I also recall thinking “Who could decide such a thing, and how would they do it?” (I did not question whether or not this was true; that did not seem important at the time.) The singular thing about this remark for me was, and remains, that of being keyed to a question about the beauty of words, how they sound, how the sound fits with the thing, the possible, secret thing. In this case, part of the beauty of the

words “cellar door” must have included what the thing conceals, what strange or forbidden things are hidden there to be discovered. There was, I think, a sense of harmony born in the experience of thinking about this remark, in thinking about the beauty of words, words as sounds, ideas and images, music and meaning, words and world, life and language. I am sure imagination was engaged long before this time, but the self-conscious awareness of constructing a world of beauty through the languages of art I think of as dating from that moment.

### III

Human identity, if there be such a thing “writ-large” is not a result or product, but a continuing process, in which the cultural activity of the arts plays a primary role. It is common now to voice political reservations about any project that offers more than a provisional description of human identity for a limited use, a use that admits to the inevitable bias of its own time and place. Even so, a view persists that the fine arts, free of politics, constitute a language different in kind but no less universal than mathematics. This view of expressive and receptive capacities common to human beings lends weight to the idea that beauty may be as much a constituting value as truth, and neither reducible to the exercise of power. These two fundamental concerns of beauty and truth, taken together, provide a foundation for a universal culture of the human that should arguably also include the values of the good and the sacred, as well as the useful. Having said this, we should remain aware of Veblen’s scathing and specific inversion of any claim to the universality of these values in his closing chapter of *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Only aware, however: I deliberately leave Marxist concerns aside in what follows. To make that turn would take us down an alleyway of discussion that would not easily offer a return to what I want to discuss in tragic drama.

Great works of art are not limited to an expression of the beautiful. Such works are concerned as well with truth, though not in the validating sense of science, with the good, though not in the justifying sense of ethics, and with the sacred, though not in the doctrinal sense of religion. One could perhaps even argue that the fine arts--sometimes called the useless arts--are also concerned with the useful, though not in the instrumental sense of utility.

If culture is an individuated process, it can also be considered, abstractly at least, a universal project—that of civilization. Although civilization seems clearly to be a product of creative labor, the role of the arts has remained ambiguous and subject to criticism. Both Plato and Freud seem to argue, for example, that the civilizing of the instincts, the taming of passions that disrupt the security and growth of community, can only come at the expense of artistic freedom. Politics and the arts appear at root to be opposing impulses. Plato’s ancient anxiety about the “divine madness” of the artist legislated censorship, and Freud’s modern analytic of the infantile indulgence of the artist counsels sublimation.

There are however, compatible alternatives to political censorship and therapeutic sublimation. Politics and art align when one considers the ideal of human community to be *freedom under law*, and the parallel requirement of art to be the free play of *disciplined* imagination. There is an impulse to order in the freedom of both kinds of cultural activity, even if the conception and role of freedom differs. A harmony of Man and World does not require, indeed precludes unison. Art is surely the most vital resource against either a one-dimensional world or one-dimensional man. There are inevitable differences and conflicts that constitute human nature and the human condition of plurality. In a healthy community no less than a great work of art, however, such differences must be reconciled or otherwise resolved into a common key of accord. Such is the task of creative activity in the parallel worlds of politics and the arts. We will consider one ancient and continuing resource in the resolution of discord in the service of cultural harmony: classical tragic drama. But first a codicil may be required for the use in this essay of the musical metaphor of harmony.

I realize, of course, that for much of 20<sup>th</sup> century music, it is problematic to speak of harmony or accord. The replacement of modal keys with tone rows shifts the idea of the coherence of a work to *cadence* and *progression*, rather than harmonic resolve. If there is no key, there is no root for a resolution. Since there is nothing to get back *to*, creative tension is left unresolved within the medium itself. There are similar problems in contemporary painting. Although I bend the metaphor of harmony to a classical frame throughout most of this essay, I hope my remarks on creative tension within classical drama will suggest ways in which, by extension, resolution is still an essential interest of

the arts. Consider only the convergence or resonance of the pitch and rhythm of contemporary music to our fragmented experience and sense of complexities in our lives and worlds. There is both cultural symptom and effect in Schoenberg's abandonment of traditional tonality to structure a new world of musical expression. In Bartok's strained and haunting quartets, or in Berg's musical portrait of *Woyzeck* as a contemporary Anyman, musical mode fits cultural mood in which we are reconciled to the radically open texture of our changing lives. If this is not a classical harmony of man and world, it is ground for a continued search for it.

#### IV

Tragic drama may seem an unlikely place to look for harmony between Man and World, for we think of tragedy as precisely that point of rupture between the "overweening passion" of the individual will and an indifferent or hostile universe. Tragic drama would thus appear a distinguishing art form in which the human situation is one of relational conflict: the individual is at odds with or contending against the universe, the gods, and others. The tragic world further threatens to dissolve into a disharmonious striving with and within the self. In classical tragic drama, the individual, as hero, pits herself as an exception to the relentless logic of the inevitable. In this vision, the human spirit is bound by discord. The heroic effort, as we spectators know from the outset and as the hero comes to recognize and acknowledge, is hopeless in its very conception. Fate is a province of Man independent of will. Destiny cannot be fashioned by an individual, however great in spirit. For Man, Fate is to be suffered, it cannot be commanded. The drama of tragic literature is not that of popular sports or political life; the excitement of the contest is not who will win, but how great the aspiration and noble the comportment of defeat. Yet there is something healing in the experience of tragic drama. It seems to have two defining moments for the spectator, perhaps moments shared with the whole of the fine arts, only here in an articulated intensity: one of provocation or disruption, and the other of recognition and reconciliation.

Mythic literature, which precedes and informs classical tragic drama, is full of stories in which passions of pride and ambition are fed by the fancies of human imagination. Prometheus stole fire from the gods and brought it to earth and mankind,

but his eternal suffering as a consequence served as no warning lesson to the hero. Rather, the daring adventure and scope of the Promethean offense appealed to the imagination of this most arrogant of creatures, Man. The act of Prometheus is a tragic gift of *possibility*—an apparent rift in the fabric of inevitability that cloaks mundane existence. In this archetypal act of willful imagination, the tragic vision of life and of human identity is cast. The lesson would seem to be that whatever act separates and thus defines the individual will, thereby violates the natural harmony of life itself.

Tragic drama claims a unique and fundamental place in the arts primarily because it focuses on a seeming disjuncture of life and meaning; it brings into question whether or what may be the meaning--the depths of sense and intelligibility--of human life. We most often are moved by and remember images of the rupture between life merely as time, and life as meaning. If life is reduced to an empty, petty pace of endless tomorrows then, indeed, it is without meaning. A tragic vision through twenty centuries, from Aeschylus to Shakespeare, affirms this truth: the agonies of the *Orestia* are echoed still in *Macbeth*, where life passes its brief hour upon a stage full of sound and fury. But if life were only sound and fury, there would be no drama, no tragic vision at all, only a darkened immersion into a random cosmic flux. Tragic drama produces a clear perception of human life, however dark, which involves judgment as well as description. In the aesthetic distance of its expression a fundamental passion of human existence is disclosed in the individual's temptation to exempt herself from the binding order of social normality, to disdain the easy identity of political community.

Dramatic art is a primary resource in identifying the uniqueness of human existence, however human identity requires reflection, whether the defining activity is labor or laughter. Fine art in general may constitute a singular mode of human expression, but it is also a reflective process in which a refractive image is formed out of the mirror of nature. *Poiesis*, the genius of art, transforms human identity so it is as much creatively formed as reflectively found. Artistic perception is already critical reflection, from and through the depth and distance of the mirrors' *taine*.

A great work of art is both open and complete. It is open to interpretation and a diversity of possible understandings, and complete as a meaningful expression of human existence. A work of tragic drama finds its coherence at the heart of conflict, in the gap

between the possibilities and inevitabilities of action and events. A kind of sublime harmony is achieved in recognition and acceptance, in the resolution of tension between an unlimited human aspiration and the prevailing limits of life and world. A human being, however heroic in will, is only defined against the greater power and larger fabric of fate or destiny. Whether the overweening passion is pride, ambition, or jealousy, whether the motive is love or vengeance, a tragic flaw embodies not merely the spiritual limits of Man, but yields recognition of the common character of human aspiration. Several elements define movement in tragic drama. A tragic vision takes shape in the initial violation of the sacred or natural that leaves the hero isolated and alienated from the ordinary resources of human community and divine benevolence. A transcendent and countervailing force then resists this breach of natural order and restores a balance to the world. These two movements figure in the dramatic quest for human identity. The drama of conflict is resolved through acknowledgement of, and reconciliation to, the limiting conditions of human existence.

## V

It is a familiar idea that fine art is a primary means through which the drama of human life finds a moment of coherence and closure; that we are reconciled to nature, to the world, to ourselves through great works of art. But in the process, art must both break the norm of expectation, and restore the balance of perception. Art breaches sensibility, then seals the breach. Great art reminds us of the more we are not, then reconciles us to the who that we are, realizing the singularity of this transcendence. Music soothes the savage breast, but it also provokes passion in the civil breast. In the visual arts, the most extreme passions are brought into a still moment of a work, vital and alive, generating a response that transcends a given moment or event. In Michaelangelo's *Pieta* and Picasso's *Guernica*, both sorrow and horror find a space of beauty or sublimity in which elemental passions become a condition of human existence: a lesion is opened in the spirit and then healed. Keats' great *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is a poetic image of crystallized motion, passion fixed by art for eternity on an urn designed to hold the ashes of a once living being. We are moved by the poem in that moment of yearning and youth

that it expresses--forever still in the beauty of its movement. A reader's mind resonant with the vision of the poem, in harmony with its expression, inhabits a soul in grace.

The metaphor of harmony operates at many different levels in different ways in different arts, of course. But there are some common threads. First of all, a work of art is in harmony with itself. This aesthetic imperative is common both to composition and performance. Such a work is also in accord with an aesthetics of experience, in harmony with the complexity of its subject, whether civil war or crucifixion, and with the diversity of its audience, whether secular or religious, perpetrator or victim. Great works of art contribute to the larger harmony between Man and World--they bring the human mind and spirit, individually and collectively into accord with the whole universe of nature. There may be no one aspect of the fine arts that accomplishes this. Capacities and effects differ with the art of music, or sculpture, or literature, and within the genres of each art.

Drama, whether ancient or modern, Sophocles, Shakespeare, or Stoppard, portrays human life as conflict. Tragic drama further uncovers an essential experiential aspect of the human condition in the isolating depths of an individual tangled in the web of her own striving. Whether the offending passion of the heroic figure is that of pride, ambition, or vengeance, we as spectators, are brought into the common suffrage and suffering of its excess.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle discusses two forms of reconciliation characteristic of ancient classical tragedy that relate to the harmony of Man and World. The first is the dramatic closure within the drama itself, a realization on the part of the hero--or the chorus--acknowledging a greater, transcendent power of destiny in the form of divine justice or simply divine interference. Although Aristotle's remarks are made in the context of classical Greek drama, the critical idea of dramatic closure has a continuing history in tragic literature. Shakespeare exemplifies the same point in as many ways as his tragedies require, in the various persons of callow lover, riven prince, jealous moor, ambitious usurper, or crazed old man. The tragic irony of Shakespeare's drama is often a wisdom put into the mouths of fools, sycophants, and villains. Think of Polonius' counsel to his son Laertes, "This above all: to thine own self be true..." or Iago's ironic baiting of Brutus "...The fault...lies not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings." The classical theme of heroic self-realization is given a contemporary twist of parody in the

familiar voice of T.S. Eliot's *Prufrock*, who confesses the pathos of everyman's fall from the grace and greatness of tragedy: "No, I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be..." Prufrock is a character that casts himself as a self-conscious caricature, a bystander spectator of his own inadequacies, who hears the snicker of the eternal footman holding his coat, as he himself stands anxiously back and can only observe the moment of his greatness flicker.

Aristotle cited a second aspect of tragic drama relevant to re-establishing a harmony of Man and World in the therapeutic experience of the audience through the characteristic emotional breach and reconciliation of catharsis. The empathic terror and pity generated in the viewer in the context of the drama is absolved through its effect: it is, after all, only a play. Even so, and even here, Art does more than imitate; it alleviates and legislates life.

## VI

There is an important reciprocity of metaphors in life and literature. Theatre draws from the drama of life, and life draws from the drama of the stage. Shakespeare often makes this connection explicit. Whether he is right that we men and women are players in a drama with seven acts, it is no prodigious feat of imagination to see our common world a stage for the very real drama of human existence that we lesser figures act out, with and for each other. Macbeth's despairing lament "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow..." cadences the possible fate of whoever contests the inevitable. Macbeth's synoptic vision of the human condition portrays the fragile uncertainty of human action from the perspective of eternity. From such a perspective, the sweep of life itself, Macbeth's and yours and mine, is but "a poor player, that frets and struts an hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more." In such a vision, the whole of existence does indeed appear as the aforesaid meaningless tale. This need not be for us, as it is for Macbeth, the final word. It is however, a word within the world of literature that reaches to the metaphoric depths of human self-understanding.

For the audience, of course, there is not simply sound and fury, but the poet's coherent vision of it. Cacophonous confusion resolves itself into an aesthetic flow of sense. Beyond the snarled consciousness of the heroic character is a lesson drawn from

the creative fabric of human imagination. We are enabled by the poet to see the world through the eyes of Macbeth, but we also see the world of Macbeth through the eyes of the poet. The audience, as a participant-spectator, has a transcendent view denied the dramatic character. Whether or not the tragic hero is reconciled to her fate, we as viewers are enabled by the art of the drama to be actor *and* chorus, participant *and* spectator. Our spiritual reconciliation is a response to dramatic art, not retributive fate.

The harmony effected by art is one of feeling and thought, of dramatic experience and cognitive understanding. We experience with the hero the horror of, and reconciliation with, his fate; but we enjoy as a viewer the harmony of this existential construction and resolution. The aspiration of the tragic hero, the story of her actions, the drama of her courage in the face of existence, is a portrayal of the human being as a creature caught between angel and ape. Shakespeare famously put this point of tragic vision in Hamlet's lyrical expression: "What a piece of work is a man...in apprehension how like a god...this quintessence of dust."

Tragic drama is thus an investigation and passionate expression of limits—the heights of human aspiration and action, but also the depths of failure in human character. Achilles is the precursor in Greek epic to Oedipus in Greek tragic drama: the mortal flaw of Achilles' heel becomes the namesake clubfoot of Oedipus. In both, archetypal feet of clay betray the man who would be king. In mythic literature it is Prometheus who serves the prototypical character of tragic culture: a figure heroic in aspiration and action, and also victim to the wages of that heroism. The heroism of the tragic figure is incomplete without the courage and nobility required of her fate.

In the tragic vision of great literature, the raw paradox of the human condition is both conceptually expressed and artistically resolved. The lesson of tragic drama contains a germ of paradox in which the high is brought low and in the low, exalted—not as a lesser god, but fully a human being. The singular importance of the human comedy in tragic literature is that reconciliation is effected not through divine grace but human perseverance. It is only in the vision of failed aspiration brought to action and turned awry that the depth of human greatness is wrought. A defining character of human being is discovered not only in the recognition that we are not gods, but also in the resolution that we shall not merely be animals. The harmony of Man and world in tragic drama is a

sustained tension resolved only in the perception and acknowledgement of the viewer. Nietzsche expressed this dramatic tension as a requirement that tragic art worship at the shrine of both Dionysos and Apollo. Light and darkness must both be preserved or the drama fails in a dismal half-light where shadow figures blur our vision.

How does the freedom entailed in the experience of art connect to the theme of reconciliation and harmony of Man and World? The moment of great art is thrilling, exhilarating, a response to the creative potential of difference, a realization of possibility, of freedom itself. It is only in imagination, through the articulated resources of art, that Man can become what he conceives himself possibly to be: not merely subject to the crushing or banal imperatives of the natural world. Man is a creature that not only thinks, but laughs and dreams, and through creative works of art fully realizes--makes real--the whole of what he is. The art of tragic drama consists in the resolution of a primal conflict between the will of man and the dominion of god. The dramatic portrayal of a will reconciled to its own limits fully achieves, if only for rare moments, the full sense and meaning of what it is to be a human being.

Art cannot claim the whole of such experiences: falling in love, the wonder of birth, an act of friendship, simple humanity, all these can claim a transcendental moment of fulfillment. There is no point or profit in reducing all such moments to the category of the aesthetic. The production and experience of art, however, make such moments the conscious focus of their activity. From a cosmic perspective, life itself is an absolute value. From a human point of view, however, this is not so. We are all aware that not every life is worth living, and that there are worse things in life than dying. The plot of action in tragic drama begins with conflict and ends with death. If tragic drama can be said to have a thesis it is that neither conflict nor death can be avoided or denied, and that whatever harmony Man achieves in the world must come through acknowledgement of, and reconciliation to, these indelible conditions of human existence.

Perhaps not surprisingly, this means that the goal of tragic drama is philosophical—its affective occasion is the pursuit of wisdom. Recall that following Socrates, the second and third reputations for wisdom among the ancients were two tragic dramatists. Sophocles, in seeming distinction from the rational professions of the philosophers of his time, insisted that true wisdom comes only through suffering. A case

may be made, however, that that there exists common ground with both Plato and Aristotle. These philosophers and the tragic poets were in accord that to genuinely know something, that truth must become part of her very life and character.

A tragic vision of human existence may not be essential to wisdom, for there is wisdom in joyful celebration of life as well as practical prudence in action. But the great lesson of tragic drama is that the harmony of man and world is grounded in the fundamental conditions under which his life is given, as a creature bound to earth and time. This harmony depends on more than political rationality, a balance of justice through the exercise of reason. A more profound wisdom than negotiation, moderation, or compromise in action or policy is one that fully acknowledges and reconciles man to the ontological foundation of his being toward death. It is to this level of wisdom that tragic drama aspires, and the harmony it yields through reconciliation is a highly wrought complex of passion and reason that, fully realized, constitutes a vision of human existence that is deep and enduring.

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