Against Innocence, against Evasion: Rowan Williams on Thinking and Speaking Tragedy

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In spite of its subsequent cultural importance, the moment of Greek dramatic tragedy was relatively short, and the details that would be helpful for understanding it are obscured by the mists of history. With roots in fifth-century BC Greece, ancient tragedies were staged in annual festivals dedicated to Dionysus. The tragedies were presented in groups of three, followed by a comic satyr play. More than one playwright would present each year. At the festival’s conclusion, one dramatist would be recognized as superior and awarded the year’s prize. While there were likely hundreds of plays written over the course of the festivals, only thirty-three survive: seven by Aeschylus; seven by Sophocles; and nineteen by Euripides. Beyond bare details, little is known about the performances, their contexts, or how they were received.

The tension between philosophy and the arts, generally, dates to that antique age: in Plato’s Republic, Socrates refers to the “ancient quarrel” between them. However, some thinkers have found in tragedy a compelling resource for philosophical and theological reflection. In recent years, there has been a revival of a theological study of tragedy in the Anglophone world, due in part to the work of Donald MacKinnon (1913–1994). While his philosophical efforts lack a systematic structure, his writings have nonetheless been

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highly influential in the past half century and have served as inspiration for much of the scholarship on the topic that has followed. MacKinnon was a realist, impatient with any philosophical or theological schema that minimized the significance and extent of suffering in the world in an attempt to categorize reality neatly and without remainder. Any “facile teleology,” as he put it, that refused to take into account the actual experiences of particular individuals was trying to avoid the truth. It is more honest, he held, to acknowledge the jagged edges of reality without evasion.

There has nonetheless remained a certain skepticism toward the idea of a Christian relationship with tragedy, from both within and outside the church. Can a Christian theology be in any sense “tragic” and still hold to the reality of the resurrection and the promise of eschatological redemption? Does not a tragic vision entail a despair that is at odds with Christian hope? Is not any claim to tragedy in a Christian context misleading, if not dishonest, given the consolation of the good news? It is to this discussion that Rowan Williams contributes *The Tragic Imagination*.

Part of the difficulty of discussing tragedy in a Christian context lies in the peculiarly modern tendency to find in tragedy a negation of the world of the living and support for a pessimistic worldview. However, while something like this may be found in Schopenhauer, it is certainly not in the Greeks or Shakespeare, for whom tragic despair would be insufficiently challenging. Instead, tragedy is a way of acknowledging that the world is such that there is suffering in it, and that human persons are both complicit in it and victims of it. We lack control over the world; there is something intractable about it that resists domination and control. That does not mean, however, that there is neither human agency nor nourishing relationships. Indeed, it is exactly because of those things that tragedy has its particular bite.

Another component of tragic dramas that Williams identifies, particularly in the Attic dramas that drew on Homeric lore, is familiarity. It is in the repeated narration and reception of these stories that new lessons may be revealed and we become reacquainted with

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the world as it is. When tragedy recounts a known line of narrative, “its task is to persuade us that at some significant level we have never really known it; that there is no finished narration but only the continuing exposure of ourselves to ever-new perspectives on the danger concealed in where and who we think we are” (p. 27). This notion of “no finished narration,” a common theme in Williams’s work, is one that frustrates his critics; Robert Jenson complained of Williams’s “endless semi-Socratic dialectic.” Williams is asserting that the development of a tragic imagination, which is also the development of moral imagination, requires patience, diligence, and deliberation—perhaps endlessly so, as long as knowledge remains partial and we see only through a glass, darkly.

Tragic recognition is not only about individual suffering, however. The original Greek performances were civic occasions, and the very nature of all drama, then and now, involves reception by a community, that is, the audience. Thus the tragic imagination is in part a political imagination, because its formation is a social event. Because it is a social event, the gathered community is reminded of the way that human beings contribute, wittingly or not, to tragic suffering by choices made. Some tragedy may not be avoidable, but neither is it entirely unaffected by human behavior, including human expressions of power. Indeed, the blurring of the boundaries between public and private, between agency and victimhood, is part of what tragic drama effects.

At the same time, tragic drama also evinces a recognition of the complexity of human behavior. Its performance constitutes paying attention to contingencies and the way that the results of intentional actions cannot always be predicted. To acknowledge the tragic is to acknowledge human finitude, in particular the aforementioned awareness that all knowledge is limited and incomplete. (The longing for divine knowledge is, of course, the first sin.) The desire for innocence, for virtue without cost, or to appear “holy without qualification,” can have tragic results (p. 12). It is part of the function of the dramas to bring those results to the attention of the community. For a community that can narrate its own complicity with injustice is one that has not been paralyzed by that complicity, but matured. What the tragedians point out is that the desire to ignore complicity is, among

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other things, short-sighted. As the Attic tragedies show most clearly (particularly Antigone and the Oedipus plays), it is the belief that serious moral and political decisions are uncomplicated that results in catastrophes that extend over generations, infecting not only families but contaminating the body politic itself.3

This all may be very good as cultural criticism, but what does it have to do with the church? The modern critic George Steiner is critical of any purported Christian appreciation of tragedy in part because he sees Christianity as unable to countenance what he calls “absolute tragedy,” which he identifies as the true spirit of the tragic world as depicted in tragic drama.4 However, Williams finds the concept of absolute tragedy incoherent. That is because the very fact of reflecting on suffering, which the plays do, presumes the existence of a particular space from which to reflect. The occasion of suffering has changed that space, or perhaps even constructed it, but that does not represent the victory of suffering. On the contrary, it indicates that one has survived the experience, and suffering is thus not victorious. Reflections on suffering demonstrate the inability of suffering, even existential horror, to be the last word. Instead, in tragic drama one sees the dramatist and actors narrating the stories. Audience members who are reflecting on those experiences at the theater will continue to grapple with them in the time that follows. The thrust here is something like Edgar’s remark in King Lear: “The worst is not / So long as we can say ‘This is the worst.’” So long as we can say the truth, speak of experiences of suffering, tell stories about them by structuring those experiences into a narrative and sympathizing with those who suffer, then suffering is not absolute. There is thus a potential healing property to dramatic tragedy in that it opens up a space for mourning, both individual and communal, in a way that would not be possible if suffering was total and thusunnarrated.

3 Space limitations prevent extensive discussion here, but Williams’s treatment of this topic, and the subsequent (and related) interpretation of Hegel, is heavily indebted to the work of Gillian Rose. The title of the present essay is a reference to a concise and insightful study of Rose by Andrew Shanks, Against Innocence: An Introduction to Gillian Rose (London: SCM Press, 2008).
Indeed, the tragic genre itself insists that unqualified suffering is not absolute precisely because of its intrinsic affirmation that individual human lives are of consequence, even in the face of their wounding and destruction, and that resignation to suffering is intolerable. In dramatic tragedy, even fractured lives can be spoken of with coherence and integrity, and speaking of them means that they are not forever defeated. One can acknowledge that there are occasions of undeserved suffering without compensation (while still refraining from insisting on the total guilt or innocence of any character), but a person who can tell a story about suffering is a person who has not been destroyed by suffering. A group of people who can gather to tell and hear these stories witnesses to the ongoing existence of a community that can exist on the other side of catastrophe. In this paradoxical way, tragedy provides the foundation for hope. Tragedy includes the acknowledgment of the seeming worst that can happen, while the performance of that “worst” opens up the possibility of a new world that neither ignores experiences of suffering nor resigns itself to them, but maintains them as outrageous and to be resisted as much as humanly possible.

Therefore, one of the functions of the latter part of Williams’s book is to show how tragedy relates to, and enriches, Christian theology through the development of this tragic imagination. The penultimate chapter of the book takes up explicitly religious themes, reflecting on the book of Job, the Gospel of John, and the celebration of the eucharist, to show how Christianity reflects this openness to tragedy in its canonical texts and practices. This is in part against critics who, like Steiner, hold that Christianity cannot admit tragedy in any authentic way because of the consolation of the resurrection. However, these critics are coming from the other theological direction, emphasizing the promise of the eschatological horizon of the faith, which they presume precludes tragedy in any authentic way. In this view, the coming redemption of all things makes history “tragic-comic irony rather than unappeased tragedy,” as John Milbank puts it.5 These criticisms of tragedy and theology have been made by both Milbank and David Bentley Hart, partially in response to the work of MacKinnon specifically. The fifth chapter of Williams’s book is thus in part a long-awaited conversation in print between serious theologians.

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who are steeped in this issue and its implications. For many readers of a theological persuasion, it will be the most interesting section of the book.

The discussion of Job, John, and the eucharist brings to light the roles of irony, drama, and hope that are contained in each of them, and the way they depict the “rupture” of suffering, a rupture that potentially extends, in the Gospel of John, to the very being of God, the possibility of the abandonment of God by God. In each of these texts, tragic irony suffuses the speeches and actions: the reader knows, but Job and the disciples do not, of the misrecognitions that are happening. The reader knows that Job is correct that he does not deserve his fate, but he is more fundamentally incorrect: issues of “deserving” do not enter into questions about suffering. In John, the community is seeing the Lord of life at work, but do not recognize him for who he is, and respond by marshaling the forces of death.

Williams is not unsympathetic to some of these criticisms of MacKinnon, in particular that he veers toward a Manichaean dualism, in which tragedy is so inevitable as to make human agency irrelevant. But Williams is undertaking an interesting reversal of MacKinnon’s defense of Christianity’s relationship to tragedy by reframing what happens within the tragic genre itself to include the opportunities it provides for mourning, and by presenting its performances as proof that suffering is not the totality of reality. Instead of focusing on demonstrating that elements of the gospel remain tragic in spite of the redemption that the church longs for, Williams holds that tragedies, by their public presentation, exhibit the possibility of new life on the other side of suffering. This is a view of dramatic tragedy that someone like Steiner or Iris Murdoch resists. At the same time, this new life is decidedly not the “appeasement” of tragedy; the tragedy is still there, in individual and communal memory, reenacted as a reminder of the limitations of being human, and the consequences of those limitations. One of the things that the reading of John shows, for example, is that there is a canonical Christian recognition of ruin that is, as Williams says, healed but not cured. For one who wants only “absolute tragedy,” or the hypostatization of tragedy, any healing would be verboten, but I have already made the case for the insufficiency of that view. Thus Williams’s perspective does not require a mitigation

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of the suffering depicted in tragedy, such as the attempt to find a happy ending in spite of all appearances.

The demonstration of the human causes of tragic suffering, as well as tragedy’s role in revealing that participation and thus undermining illusions of innocence, include the way that the multiple layers of irony in, for example, the Gospel of John function to bring the truth to light: “Only in the working out of this misrecognition [of life as death] can recognition occur” (p. 121). That “working out” is what is reenacted in the eucharist, causing the present-day members of the church, which after all was formed and could only be formed in the aftermath of that recognition, to question what it is that they do not currently see. The worshiping community may ask itself, where is Jesus present today that we are not seeing? What is Jesus saying today that we are not understanding? Have we learned, and do we continue to learn, the lessons of the disciples’ misrecognition? Are we able to speak of suffering without evasion? Have we yet lost those illusions of innocence? Have these experiences taught us to think better?

This admonition to “think better” is what Williams sees in Hegel’s writing on tragedy. Williams’s defense of Hegel here is innovative and intriguing. It is also where the brevity of the book most clearly reveals itself as a liability. The customary view of Hegel’s aesthetics is that his valorization of the tragic form is an appreciation of an anemic version of the genre, one that is unwilling to consider suffering without the consolation of reconciliation within history. This is the inevitable result of his metaphysical commitment to the dialectic of Spirit-as-history, which necessarily considers the resolution of all conflicts as ultimately bringing about something better. (The customary tag for this view is the movement from thesis and antithesis to synthesis.) For example, in the play he discusses most frequently, Antigone, Hegel describes the conflict between Creon and Antigone as the conflict between two conflicting versions of law: the law of the city versus the law of familial piety, and the tragedy is the ensuing “collision of rights.” The resolution of this conflict in the play leads to the tragic ending: Antigone dead; Haemon dead; Eurydice dead; Creon in despair. For Hegel, however, reconciliation ultimately also follows from this conflict, and thus the conflict dissolves and order is restored. This tragic resolution is nothing less than the restoration of the unity of the

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7 Hegel’s writings on tragedy have been helpfully collected in Anne Paolucci and Henry Paolucci, ed., Hegel on Tragedy (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978).
ethical and so the reconciliation of fundamental reality. The means may be bloody, but the outcome is positive and peaceful; tragedy is domesticated and rational. Seen teleologically, all endings are, in fact, happy endings.

It is obvious how this view can be seen as the elision of suffering in the name of a higher good and, in its elision, dishonesty. Williams, however, drawing from Gillian Rose, reads Hegel otherwise. In his telling, Hegel, the philosopher of cognition, sees the representation of tragedy as making the case for "thinking about thinking" (p. 69, p. 78). It is not that Hegel sees triumphant reason restoring equilibrium to a reality riven by tragedy. Instead, Hegel finds tragedy to be the encouragement of the practice of acknowledging and accepting the risk of full participation in history. Hegel's view is that tragic drama shows the consequences that follow from "self and truth fall[ing] apart" (p. 73), in which the self-image of the agent loses its connection with a reality that is complex and compromising. Thus, Antigone had a false and illusory sense of personal identity, seeing herself and her values as independent, ultimate, and hermetically sealed off from other considerations, including the integrity of other personal identities; Creon had the same. By refusing to consider anything but their own self-images, which excluded recognition of the self-image of the other, both were setting themselves up for devastation. Both characters were in effect refusing to see the world in its intricate difficulty, refusing to admit the perils of agency and the complexity of human behavior. They were refusing, at root, to think. Tragic performances expose the results of this refusal and thus encourage thinking. Optimally, they encourage the transformation of the thinking of the audience. So while there is a reconciliation of sorts at the end of the tragedy, it is not one in which the audience is reconciled without regret to the suffering depicted. It is one in which the audience is reconciled to a reality that includes human limitation and necessary risk, and thus requires empathy, deliberation, and humility.

It seems ungenerous to criticize reflections on Hegel as being too brief. However, Williams's interpretation of Hegel on tragedy, read through Rose-colored glasses and drawing on more recent work by Stephen Houlgate,8 is uncommon and could potentially be a significant contribution to conversation around this issue. That said, there

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is a reason that the received view of Hegel is different than Williams’s own: Hegel often seems to be saying exactly what Williams is asserting that he is not saying. That being the case, he needs to say so much more to be convincing on this issue that the result is more thought provoking than persuasive. Further, this conversation about Hegel is all the more important because of the prominent role played in the discussion of theology and tragedy by Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988), who took Hegel as one of his primary conversation partners, and whose own work is often cited in scholarship in this area. Williams discusses Balthasar appreciatively in chapter 5, rightly granting him a seminal place in the development of the study of theology and tragedy in the twentieth century.\(^9\) The relationship between Hegel, Balthasar, and tragedy has received some academic attention. One of the more recent and substantive examples is Cyril O’Regan’s *Anatomy of Misremembering*, which is as programmatically critical of Hegel as Williams is programmatically supportive.\(^10\)

Alas, further exploration of these relationships and their interpretations must wait for another book. The chapter in *The Tragic Imagination* that contains the main discussion of Hegel is titled “Reconciliation and Its Discontents.” One expects that, after finishing this book, those discontented with Hegelian dialectic will remain that way for the time being, thesis and antithesis not yet synthesized.

This slim volume interacts with multiple facets of tragedy and its study: its political implications; the issue of empathy; how to think about thinking; how to speak about suffering. In addition to the Greeks, Williams draws on Shakespeare, Racine, and John Milton. The work of contemporary playwright Sarah Kane receives extended reflection. Links with Japanese Noh drama are explored. The list of philosophical and theological interlocutors is formidable, and in the course of 160 pages one sees Williams carrying on conversations with each one of them in the deep, deliberate, and occasionally opaque

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\(^9\) Mackinnon’s own work was inspired by Balthasar; see “Some Reflections on Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Christology with Special Reference to Theodramatik II/2 and III (1986),” in John C. McDowell, ed., *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty* (New York: T & T Clark, 2011), 281–288.

way that one has come to expect from him. Given its brevity, the book is not a definitive or systematic work, but it shows no indication of an ambition to be so. It is one side of a conversation, interacting with other voices. But they are the most profound voices, on the most profound issues. For that fact itself, the book is to be appreciated.

In these debates about tragedy, particularly as it interacts with theology, it should not be forgotten that not all of the Greek dramatic tragedies end in despair or catastrophe. Fully half of the examples that have survived do not end that way, including *Iphigenia at Tauris, Helen, Ion, Orestes, Philoctetes*, and others. As Louis Ruprecht writes, what makes these plays tragedies is not that they end badly, but that they *begin* badly.\(^{11}\) That is, they begin in a world of finitude and contingency, a world in which virtue and fortune are not linked, to Kant’s chagrin, and the arguments of Job’s friends throughout the ages notwithstanding. It has ever been thus. Williams writes that “there is no intellectual progress over the millennia in theories about the problem of suffering as there may be in theories about the birth of stars or the working of the brain” (p. 42) and that is both clearly true and clearly against the progressivist, techno-utopian spirit of the age. The honest acknowledgement of uncompensated suffering is threatening and uncomfortable, reminding us that our home remains east of Eden. A sensitive exposure to the work of tragedians, ancient and modern, can help reteach the lessons of tragedy to a world that confuses hope with optimism.

The series of which *The Tragic Imagination* is a part is titled The Literary Agenda, and there is a sense in which this book is not only about dramatic tragedy, but is a paean to the liberal arts generally. Without ever stating it explicitly, Williams makes a convincing case that the formation of a moral community to constitute the *polis*—a civic society that is deliberative and interested in the pursuit of justice, but without illusions of its own innocence or omniscience—is an artistic, not a technocratic, achievement. Perhaps the right kind of modern-day professional consultant could brainstorm ways of expressing empathy, but not even the most expensive could construct the moral universe needed to explain why it matters. It should not be a surprise that a world in which public conversations of crucial importance are marked by willful ignorance of other points of view

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is also one in which the study of literature and drama, not to mention philosophy and theology, plays a minor role at best. Instead, our present-day human drama is characterized by the primacy of the values of the market and the nation-state. And, whether politically liberal or politically conservative, intentionally or inadvertently, the church may participate in that neoliberal, consumerist culture as much as anyone else, duplicating the partisanship of a shallow civic discourse that resists any nonsentimental acknowledgement of its own guilt. One imagines that Euripides would not be surprised at the subsequent social and political turmoil that follows. Not all tragedies end badly. But some do.
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