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## Augustine on Heart and Life

### Essays in Memory of William Harmless, S.J.

Edited by John J. O'Keefe and Michael Cameron

#### 10. Augustine's Tragic Vision

Paul M. Blowers, Emmanuel Christian Seminary at Milligan College

##### Abstract

This essay explores Augustine's capacity to accommodate a tragic vision of human existence within his interpretation of the Christian revelation. Broadly speaking, for Augustine, sacred history combines the tragic necessity of self-inflicted human sinfulness with the benevolent necessity of the economy of divine grace. Augustine to some degree admired the pagan tragedians for compelling the attention and emotion of their audiences in confronting the ineluctability of evil (and other tragic themes), but their mimesis ultimately failed since it could not touch the reality conveyed in divine revelation. Two exegetical test cases, the story of Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter (Judges 11) and King Saul's tragic heroics in 1 Samuel, exemplify how Augustine greatly profited from interpreting Scripture through a tragical lens. A whole other dimension of Augustine's tragic vision appears in his attempt – inspired from his own early experience of staged tragedies in Carthage – to reenter ancient philosophical debates on tragedy and mimesis, and to revamp in Christian terms the tragic emotions, especially tragic pity as Christian mercy.

Keywords: tragedy, necessity, theodicy, mimesis, catharsis, tragic pity

## Introduction

“Tragedy” and “the tragic” are notoriously slippery terms both in historical and colloquial usage. Over the centuries “tragedy” has been employed to indicate, on the one hand, a genre of ancient drama – one depicting flawed human characters struggling heroically against the leviathan forces of cosmic necessity (in the form of abject suffering, death, etc.) – and, on the other hand, commonly today, a catastrophic event catching observers by utter surprise and upending their sense of cosmic stability and justice. The fact that one definition of tragedy names an artistic *depiction of reality* and the other an *all-too-real reality* – an objective property that events give off, as Max Scheler says, “like a heavy breath” (3) – betrays an interpretive aporia in which we humans have long found ourselves. Doubtless someone among his friends or admirers has called the untimely death of William Harmless, S.J., a tragedy, having died in the prime of his religious, priestly, and scholarly career. I confess, however, that I think Bill himself would have contested that description, not the least because his spiritual hero Augustine of Hippo would have contested it as well, and for a variety of reasons having to do with what sense Christians, as believers in a provident God, a God who has defined “evil” and “necessity” precisely by redeeming creation from them, can make of the tragic.

## Augustine and the Re-Scripting of the Tragic

My purpose in this essay is to see the tragic through Augustine’s eyes, and to explore his views on the compatibility of Christianity with a tragic vision of the world – an issue which has of late re-insinuated itself into Christian theology.<sup>1</sup> For clarity, by “the tragic” I will specifically be referencing the perceived reality of an inexorable condition of the human race, bound up with its finitude and mortality. “Tragedy” proper, however, will refer exclusively to the dramatic representation of tragic circumstances and of characters’ struggles therein, in keeping with ancient usage. Augustine cared about both. The identification and reinterpretation of “the tragic” along Christian lines is, in my judgment, a project that was being undertaken by a number of patristic writers in the post-Constantinian era, including particularly Apollinaris the Elder,<sup>2</sup> the Cappadocian Fathers, and John Chrysostom, as well as Augustine. In Augustine’s case, redefining “the tragic” was not so much a matter of sustained or targeted assault on how Greco-Roman tragedies portrayed the inescapable storms and stresses of human existence; rather, it was a byproduct of his cumulative rethinking of creation, providence, time, evil, human nature, sin, salvation, and the eschatological future. To track his revamping of “the tragic” in this broad theological context would require a long essay or monograph of its own; and so a few brief and rather general observations must suffice here.

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<sup>1</sup> A significant amount of this interest has been in response to the “Theo-Dramatics” of von Balthasar (1988-1998). Also important, however, were the work of MacKinnon and Surin. More recently see Williams; Quash; and Taylor and Waller.

<sup>2</sup> Apollinaris was a fourth-century Syrian bishop who reputedly transmuted sections of the Old Testament into tragic verse.

For Augustine, the tragic dimension of human existence bespeaks a contingent condition that has nonetheless hardened into a *given* condition in view of the genetic legacy of Adamic sin. Humanity does not battle against cosmic forces operating independently of a transcendent and provident God. We can infer this, for example, in Augustine's treatment of what Paul calls the cosmic "elemental powers" (στοιχεῖα; *elementa mundi*) (Galatians 4:3, 9), which Augustine takes to mean the false divinities (the material elements themselves, the planetary bodies, etc.) to which Gentiles were enslaved (4:8), tied also to the equally enslaving pseudo-calculations ("days, months, years, and times," Galatians 4:10-11) of pagan "astrologers and Chaldeans" (*Exp. Gal.* 29.1-35.8). In Augustine's view, humanity battles rather against its own self-inflicted imprisonment within a fallen nature and will. The tragic circumstance of the human race is the charade of an aberrant freedom stemming from Adam's original desire and choice of evil *qua* evil. In Adam humanity has chased after what does not exist (evil having no being as such in creation); but in courting and sustaining evil humanity has granted it the status of an entity within human nature (see *Nupt. et conc.* 2.28.48-29.50; for Augustine's subscription to the notion of evil as *privatio* of being or the good, see, e.g., *Conf.* 7.12.18-19). This infection is the sub-plot of the drama of the revelation of an extrinsic divine grace and mercy totally unknown to the classical tragedians. The *tragic* dimension is radically transformed because the fateful necessity imposed by original sin is preempted by the benevolent necessity of the grace of the triune God. At the existential and experiential level, however, the tragic condition of humanity relentlessly endures as the upshot of disordered desire and will. Augustine's reflection twice in the *Confessions* that "I had become to myself a vast problem" (*factus eram ipse mihi magna quaestio*; 4.4.9; also 10.33.50), resounds a seemingly inescapable reality for sinners languishing under the weight of their own impotence and moral atrophy apart from divine grace. For the elect and the reprobate alike, moreover, the actually experienced reality of evil is one and the same. In the words of J. F. Worthen, citing Augustine in a study of the compatibility of Christianity and the tragic,

Tragic drama rests on the insight that suffering both is and is not of our own deserving, that evil takes its origin in the darkness of the human will, but exacts its penalty with blind injustice and savagery, in complete indifference to our merits and demerits; hence it is at once transparent and inscrutable, knowable in its beginning but unknowable in its end. It is that polarity, that tension, which makes tragedy possible, a tension implicitly acknowledged in the most profound documents of the Christian faith (112).

Among Augustine scholars, Paul Rigby has been one of the few to attend closely to the tragic perspective in the bishop's thought, principally (though not exclusively) through analysis of the *Confessions*. Worthen and Rigby both assert that with Augustine a tragic vision of evil and human existence functions ultimately to undermine the quest for a theodicy, a theodicy such as can all too easily default to a pretentious (even narcissistic) human rationalization of the ways of God (Worthen: 111-12; Rigby 1999, 2015). For Rigby, Augustine's tragic perspective comes into clearest focus in what he posits to be three registers of the bishop's doctrine of original sin. First is the *penal* register, where the curse of original sin, and of the concomitant suffering and mortality, is altogether plausible as a punishment for human disobedience. Here the rule of retribution is in effect, and a certain venture into theodicy is

inevitable (1999: 612).<sup>3</sup> I find an interesting example here, though it comes from before his mature thinking on original sin, in Augustine's treatment of the physical suffering of allegedly innocent infants in *De libero arbitrio*. Who says that their putative innocence inherently entails merit only of the good? And yet the apparent injustice of an infant's suffering is obviated by considering both the good served to the parents, who are matured by having to endure this adversity, and the future compensations God may have in store for their child (*Lib. arb.* 3.23.68). Later, Augustine will reframe the issue, but still with a concern for divine justice. Infants must be punishable for original sin, and worthy of baptism, otherwise God would be utterly unjust in allowing some of them to experience horrible disease and suffering and death (*C. Iul.* 1.6.24; *C. Iul. imp.* 1.3).

Second, according to Rigby, is the *tragic* register, which presumes the ineluctability of evil and the mystery of the divine will rather than the moral measure of individual human acts according to a humanly contrived understanding of divine justice, as the backdrop and horizon for any consideration of human freedom and ethics (2015: 144-76, 191-94). The Christian lives within that tragic register only through an "unverifiable faith and an agonizing wisdom" (2015: 173-74), even in the face of such implacable realities as the damnation of unbaptized infants (2015: 121-23, 126-29, 135-38, 177). Theodicy here is effectively cast to the winds.

Third and finally is the register of *grace*, the Christian redemptive story into which is enfolded the penal and the tragic. "Here," writes Rigby, "the just and the tragic faces of God are two existentially anguishing experiences of God revealing the God of gift. Moral freedom and tragic necessity must both, in their turn, give way before the Pauline doctrine of gracious superabundance" (1999: 612-13).<sup>4</sup>

Rigby's categories are grandiose in scope, scaling interpretive heights no doubt, but are still exceedingly useful, I believe, for exploring the internal tensions and dialectics of Augustine's theology. And indeed, in a more recent essay, David Tracy (apparently independently of Rigby, whom he does not cite) has proposed his own three interpretive categories in an analysis of Augustine's construction of the human self in its existential situation. Noting how medieval and Renaissance interpreters gravitated to the nature-grace paradigm in Augustine while the classic Protestant Reformers elevated his sin-grace paradigm, Tracy suggests that there was a third and concurrent tragedy-grace paradigm, implicit but real, which represented Augustine's struggle not only with the evil caused by sin but also with the seemingly random and fateful suffering leveled upon the human race by raw circumstance. Tracy rightly observes that Augustine avoided deploying tragic language theologically lest he subvert his Christian commitment to divine providence; but in spite of himself Augustine identified a legacy of evil-*qua*-suffering that could not be fully contained in the doctrine of inherited sin (Tracy: 50-69).

With respect to a tragical register in his thought, there is a risk of assuming that Augustine was working consciously to compare the dilemma of the inescapability of evil, and so too the

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<sup>3</sup> See also Rigby 2015: 131-46, where he extends the discussion to the penal dimension of atonement theology and predestination as well as original sin.

<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere Rigby speaks of this register of grace and superabundance in terms of the "lyric" of love that transcends the discourses of justice and tragedy alike: (2015: 70, 125, 126, 177-99 [esp. 179, 194]).

helter skelter of evil in Christian experience, with the plot structures of Greek and Roman tragedies.<sup>5</sup> As we know from the *City of God*, he was willing, from the largely bankrupt pagan theatrical spectacles, to single out tragedy and comedy as “more acceptable” (*tolerabiliora*) since, even if they contained immoral content, they were largely free of verbal obscenities and with good reason had been included for study in a liberal arts education (*Civ* 2.8). Tracy argues, by “clarification through contrast” with the principal Greek tragedians, that Augustine actually did match, with great insight, some of their salient themes:

Who among the ancients, other than Euripides, is more penetrating than Augustine on how our affects and passions can so becloud and take over our minds that we reach the point of impenetrable self-delusion? . . . [And yet] Augustine’s awesome vision of the power of inherited original sin possesses a more Aeschylean *gravitas* than any Euripidean lament over disordering passions . . . [And as in Aeschylus] profound suffering purifies both mind and heart to be open to receive tragic wisdom. This classic Aeschylean wisdom can be found in Augustine, whose tragic wisdom was of course theologically transformed by his Christian vision into Christian *agapic* wisdom through suffering, a process of which the cross reminds all Christians . . . However, there is also something peculiarly Sophoclean in Augustine’s overdetermined model of the self. Augustine could have written his own (to be sure, Christianly transformed) version of Sophocles’ greatest ode: his ode to humankind as *deimos*, that is, as a paradoxical wonder shining in intelligence and joyful strength while at the same time sharply damaged and twisted. *Deimos* is a Sophoclean word for the abyss of wonder that is the human self (63, 64, 65).

But to the extent that Augustine entertains the tragic on his own terms, it is something larger than the themes of the classical tragedies. The pagan tragedians doubtless set some important standards in describing the overwhelming dread that there are fateful forces operative in the fabric of the cosmos (including the inescapability of evil); and I certainly concur with Tracy on the salient thematic parallels with these ancient dramatists. And Tracy is absolutely right, I believe, in pointing to the tragedy-grace paradigm as intrinsic to Augustine’s confrontation with the incomprehensible abyss of the self and its quest to find definition in the deep mystery of its own existence (67-68).<sup>6</sup> But Augustine had a deep sense of the tragic within the Bible itself, which, as he implies in one of his sermons, held church audiences captive with its own theatrical *spectacula* (*Io. eu. tr.* 7.6; for similar allusions in other texts of Augustine, see Harmless: 191, n. 35).

A few examples must suffice. One of the most spectacularly tragic stories in all of the Bible is the demise of the daughter of the Israelite mercenary Jephthah in Judges 11. This narrative drips with tragic themes, most notably Jephthah’s fateful vow to God, a seeming act

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<sup>5</sup> Tracy (52-53) is convinced that Augustine, though largely ignorant of the major Greek tragedies, took serious account of Vergil’s *Aeneid* as a Roman lamentation of the tragic necessity of suffering not caused directly by human sin.

<sup>6</sup> The Augustinian self, Tracy writes, “is penultimately comprehensible only as an overdetermined self – dazzlingly intelligent and loving, constituted by will as energy and will as choice – as well as a graced, sinful, and tragic self” (68).

of piety which by bitter reversal – a good tragic theme – results in the death-by-sacrifice of his beloved daughter, followed by his “discovery” (what Aristotle called the tragic character’s ἀναγνώρισις) of the consequences of his action, the outrage of his own vow. Like several patristic exegetes before him, Augustine wrestles to make sense of a seemingly senseless story. He implies its tragic dimension by amplifying the fact that Jephthah knew from the outset, despite the ban on human sacrifice, that his sacrifice would be a *who* and not a *what* (presumably his wife or daughter).<sup>7</sup> And there is no divine approval or disapproval here, no intervention, as there was in Abraham’s praiseworthy attempt to sacrifice Isaac. But it is clear that Augustine does not desire to assign this story fully to the tragic register (again using Rigby’s template), because he still looks long and hard for a rationale, some justification of Jephthah’s action and vindication of God’s providence in this wretched story. Comparing Jephthah with Gideon, Augustine notes how the “spirit of the Lord” had descended upon both men (cf. Judges 6:34; 11:29) despite their outrageous behaviors. Is there a special dispensation in their cases? After all, both men are enshrined in the litany of Old Testament saints set forth in Hebrews 11 (11:32). Augustine ultimately speculates that God allowed Jephthah to sacrifice his daughter as a prophetic object lesson for the people of Israel, who, being dull-witted to the fact that sacrifices were but a prefiguration of the superior sacrifice of Christ, needed an *a fortiori* demonstration, using a human being, that all sacrifice pointed to Christ (*Qu.* 7.49.1-6, 14).

Augustine was nonetheless faced with the radical disparity between Jephthah’s own intention and the intention of God to use his misdeed for good *ex post facto* (Thompson: 128-29). The basic interpretive dilemma here is reminiscent of what Augustine earlier faced in responding to the Manichaean Faustus’s outrage against the egregiously inappropriate behaviors of major figures in the Old Testament, including all those so lost in superstition that they performed sacrifices to God (*C. Faust.* 22.2). If certain actions of the Old Testament saints appear vicious, and there is no explicit condemnation of them in Scripture, could those deeds not be construed as worthy of imitation (*C. Faust.* 22.26)? Augustine appeals to a higher providence, the “eternal law,” in rebutting Faustus. Abraham, for instance, may seem to have committed adultery with Hagar (Gen. 16:1-16), and with Sarah’s knowledge and approval no less, but the overriding motivation of Abraham and Sarah alike was the expeditious fulfillment of God’s original promise of manifold descendants (*C. Faust.* 22.32). In his sacrificial vow to God, however, Jephthah’s motivations were far more perplexing and disturbing, for which reason he was justly punished by the death of his daughter. As for the daughter herself, who appears the most tragic figure of all in the narrative, Augustine suggests, on the one hand, that her faithful submission to her father’s vow assured her soul would be received mercifully by God, and, on the other hand, that, typologically, Jephthah could be interpreted as a Christ-figure who offered up the sacrifice of his virgin-daughter, the Church, to God (*Qu.* 7.49.15, 26).

As John Thompson notes in his extensive study of patristic and medieval interpretations of this narrative, there is little compensation from Augustine for modern readers looking for deeper exegesis of the anguish of the tragic hero Jephthah or, even more, that of his daughter.

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<sup>7</sup> See *Qu.* 7.49.6, where we find that Augustine’s Old Latin text of Judges 11:31 has Jephthah vowing that his sacrifice will be not “whatever” (*quodcumque*) comes through his door after the victory but “whoever” (*quicumque*) comes, i.e. a patently human victim.

Thompson argues, however, that the very fact that Augustine struggles with this problem at far greater length than any of his other *Questions on the Heptateuch*, and at far greater length than Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac, should be some clue to us at how vexed he was by the story (130). Perhaps we might see it as a spectacular example of the limits of his tragic vision, although, of course, this may be much more problematic for us than it was for him.

Let us look at how Augustine approaches one other Old Testament narrative long considered a candidate for tragic interpretation: the demise of King Saul in 1 Samuel 13-31. As Francesca Murphy observes in her excellent theological commentary on 1 Samuel, some scholars have remained convinced that Saul cannot be interpreted as a tragic hero because his story is not showcased on its own terms but only as a prelude to the rise of the Davidic monarchy (277-28). Murphy also notes the nervousness of modern Christian interpreters toward the idea that Saul, as a tragic hero, contended with the dark side of God or with a providence that seemed to drive him to failure. And yet Augustine's interpretation of Saul in the *City of God*, the formative one for the later Western Christian tradition, makes modern audiences squeamish with its assertion that, even before his disobedience (1 Samuel 13:13; 15:19ff), God had predestined Saul to fall short of the messianic kinship reserved for David, and that accordingly Saul purely and simply typified the rejection of Israel in favor of the Church of Jesus the Christ (*Civ.* 17.6-7). Murphy, however, defends the tragic perspective of Augustine. Modern interpreters of King Saul as a tragic hero, she argues, ultimately have treated the story as a melodrama, not a tragedy, in which the flawed Saul is still victimized by a certain divine ambivalence or even caprice respecting his own destiny. I would wholeheartedly concur with Murphy that tragic interpretation like that of Augustine attempts to hold in dialectical tension both the futility of human existence and its infinite value as guaranteed by a provident and infinitely good God whose ways nonetheless defy any easy or premature rationalization (280-82). Indeed, Augustine's tragic vision here functions to amplify precisely the misbegottenness of Saul's own monarchy, in which he himself is more pawn than king, in order to force the audience of this narrative away from any refuge in theodicy and toward an insight into the gracious God of Israel and the Church, whose utter freedom leaves it staggered and even disoriented.

### Tragic Vision and the Christian Re-scripting of Tragic Emotion

Let me now shift gears. In trying to see the tragic through Augustine's eyes, we must not, it seems to me, restrict ourselves to how a tragic vision of the world was being critically integrated into his larger – and immensely complex – theological and hermeneutical project. I believe we must also get at how his own, shall we say “practical,” experience factors in. We must, as it were, re-enter the theatre with the young Augustine, especially as he describes his own experience at Carthage early in book three of his *Confessions*. The tragic was not, after all, a purely objective or abstract category for interpreting the world. Invariably the tragic also called up *tragedy*, a mode of poetry or drama that, as Augustine well knew, had served for centuries in pagan culture as the primary medium for interpreting the tragic in history.

Augustine found himself squarely at the crossroads of two enormous Greco-Roman traditions respecting the meaning and utility of tragedy. The first, of course, was Plato's extended rebuke of the poets in his *Republic* and *Laws*, a virtual declaration of war on their vain attempt to represent *reality* – that is, intelligible truth that is the exclusive domain of *philosophy*

– by mere imitation (μίμησις). The tragic poets, Plato charged, were charlatans hypnotizing their audiences with the equivalent of witchcraft (γοητεία). Tragical mimesis could seduce even astute observers into the superficial pleasure of “sympathizing with” (συμπάσχοντες) and “taking seriously” (σπουδάζοντες) the emotions expressed by characters, even when those same observers would pride themselves, in their own real-life experiences, on being calm and collected amid misfortune. The cheap satisfaction of identifying with the tragically stricken characters, “contemplating the woes of others” and “feeding fat the emotion of pity” easily led to resonating such emotions in real life, again to the detriment of reason and good philosophy (*Republic* 605C-606D).<sup>8</sup> Plato has thus been credited with the decisive opening salvos in a centuries-old battle between poetics and philosophy. Augustine was sure to have recognized, however, certain signals of negotiability in Plato. One, certainly, was Plato’s own recognition of the power of poetic *mythos* vis-à-vis philosophical *logos* in the creation story in his *Timaieus*, or in his famous “Myth of Er” at the end of the *Republic*. What is more, in one of his climactic repudiations of the poets, Plato airs a mock response of the philosophical lawgivers to their tragedian rivals:

Most excellent of strangers, we ourselves, to the best of our ability, are the authors of a tragedy at once superlatively fair and good; at least, all our polity is framed as a representation (μίμησις) of the fairest and best life, which is in reality, as we assert, the truest tragedy. Thus we are composers of the same things as yourselves, rivals of yours as artists and actors of the fairest drama, which, as our hope is, true law, and it alone, is by nature competent to complete (*Laws* 817A-B).

Plato herein suggests that the philosophers have already bested the poets at their own game, and yet that game is precisely one of defining the “truest tragedy” (τραγωδία ἢ ἀληθεστάτη). Perhaps, then, tragedy and philosophy, in the quest for ultimate wisdom and truth, might not be so absolutely antithetical, or else, as Stephen Halliwell argues, Plato sees tragedy as “*a philosophy in embryo*,” which, though flawed, nonetheless enriches philosophy by being such a tenacious competitor (2002: 116-17).

In his protracted reflection in the *Confessions* on watching tragedies in Carthage, Augustine’s basic sympathy with Plato’s position is obvious enough. These plays stage fictitious events, mere imitations of reality, so why would anyone desire to invest in them emotionally, to play along with the tragic characters merely for the cheap thrill of a pleasurable pity (*Conf.* 3.2.2-3)? His criticism echoes the *De vera religione*, where Augustine decries how one can be so subtly duped by spectacles or games, which, in their play of mere appearance, induce phantasms in our minds that delude us from reality, causing us to betray the quest for truth in order to satisfy our vain desire (*Vera rel.* 49.94-95; see also von Balthasar 1984: 124-25).

But returning to his musings about the experience of theatre in the *Confessions*, Augustine reveals how he was also grappling with the other major inherited tradition assessing and valorizing tragedy: namely, Aristotle’s attempt in the *Poetics* to analyze tragedy in its own right, as a mode of drama with definable features, including the conforming of plot and characters to “what is possible according to probability (τὸ εἰκός) or necessity (τὸ ἀναγκαῖον) (1451A-B,

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<sup>8</sup> Plato here approximates Aristotle’s later description of tragic pity as emotional catharsis.

1452A), and perhaps most importantly the capacity to produce in spectators a healthy cleansing (*καθάρσις*) of certain kinds of emotion, especially pity” (1449B, 1452A-1453A). Augustine acknowledges the uncanny ability of the tragedies to elicit pity, and even though the pity may be a sham, it exercises something deep within the passible soul. Indeed, he says, people are wont to get up and leave the theatre if the tragedy does not elicit enough emotion. We must be cautious in reading him here, for he engages an interpretive as well as experiential aporia – the perplexing combination of misery and pleasure in *miser cordia* – that has larger repercussions for his conception of Christian mercy:

Tears and agonies . . . are objects of love. Certainly everyone wishes to enjoy himself. Is it that while no one wants to be miserable (*miserum*), yet it is agreeable to feel merciful (*miser cordem*)? Mercy cannot exist apart from suffering. Is that the sole reason why agonies are an object of love? This feeling flows from the stream of friendship, but where does it go? Where does it flow to? Why does it run down into the torrent of boiling pitch, the monstrous heats of black desires into which it is transformed? From a heavenly serenity it is altered by its own consent into something twisted and distorted (*Conf.* 3.2.3; Chadwick: 36).

Here we see the overlap of Platonic and Aristotelian perspectives. Certainly, Augustine maintains the folly of having sympathized with actors’ mere imitations of human agony. But if we play along with the dramatic ploy, resonating the pain we see and expressing *miser cordia*, we invariably play a fine line between the thoroughly decent sense of friendship (*amicitia*) with those who suffer and a fast decent into self-indulgent emotional voyeurism. In the historical background, Augustine knows the checkered history of Roman tragedy, its having been caught, especially during the late republican and earlier imperial age, in the clutches of Rome’s quasi-burlesque theatrical culture. Classical tragedy struggled to survive in late antiquity, and did so mainly outside Rome, in places like Carthage (Boyle: 221-38, esp. 236). So too there was the residual sense, bequeathed by earlier polemicists like Tertullian and Novatian, that theatrical spectacle of any kind was intrinsically contaminating, a scenario confirmed by Augustine in the case of his soul-mate Alypius (*Conf.* 6.8.13). That decent emotions like pity could quickly degenerate into “the monstrous heats of black desires” was like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

But could there still be some hope for a *healthy* cleansing of emotion at the sight of tragedy? Might the theatrical experience aid in the education of desire and of the whole affective self? One of the theories of classical tragedy is that it aimed to be a “*paideia* in pity,” giving souls a dry run for cultivating the kind of compassion or empathy that would strengthen the communal integrity and solidarity of the polis (see Stanford; Nussbaum: 388-91; Alford). Aristotle’s tragic catharsis, in this case, would be something much more than a purging of unpleasant feelings. Scholars are greatly divided over the precise meaning of this catharsis, some believing that it implies simply a venting that resolves pity and fear; others saying that it evokes the therapeutic purification or clarification of these emotions such that they might become morally useful; and still others, by a more platonizing interpretation, suggesting that catharsis implies a real transcending of these emotions so that the soul itself, thus freed from their selfish turmoil, might identify *compassionately* with the higher virtues of the tragic

characters, such as magnanimity or courage in the face of undeserved suffering (on the variant interpretations of tragic catharsis, see Halliwell 1998: 350-55; Belfiore: 257-360).

In my opinion, Augustine's own view falls between the second and third approaches. On the one hand, tragic pity might help to educate Christian mercy, even as a *negative* tutorial, for while it does not induce an audience member to help the suffering but simply to grieve their situation (*Conf.* 3.2.2), one can learn how *authentic* mercy is drained of pleasure and embraces the pain of deep association with the suffering other – such as the sinner who is tragically reveling in their sin (*Conf.* 3.2.3). On the other hand, again, tragic pity is intrinsically vulnerable, easily deviating from high ideals – like friendship [*amicitia*] with the suffering – into selfish pleasure. Presumably, then, true Christian mercy would strive after cultivating that friendship, and empathetically deepening the bond between the Christian and the suffering other in the theatre of real life. Meanwhile, Augustine, here in book III and throughout the *Confessions*, was a spectator to his own self as a tragic self, a pitiable figure, that sinner reveling in his own wickedness, with whom the supremely authentic mercy of God deigned to identify in an all-too-real drama of redemptive and transformative grace (*Conf.* 3.2.4-3.5).

### Conclusion

This paper has been a cursory attempt to view the tragic through Augustine's eyes, focusing both on objective and subjective dimensions. Augustine participated in, and contributed to, a much larger patristic attempt to re-imagine the tragic objectively in human existence along Christian lines, acknowledging the powerful impact of Greek and Roman tragedy as a lens on the enduring struggles of humankind against cosmic forces of necessity, but also looking to the Bible as providing its own insights into the tragic character of human striving. For Augustine, the tragic represented a way for Christianity to articulate, on its own terms, the experience of the inescapability and relentless power of evil alongside the freedom of the Creator to reveal and effect his grace in seemingly fateful circumstances.

So far as the subjective dimension of the tragic is concerned, Augustine, like other Christian thinkers in late antiquity, conceded the fact that in processing the tragic, the dramatic art-form of tragedy in pagan culture, despite its liabilities and its historic association with the battle between poetics and philosophy, still had some relative value insofar as tragic pity and catharsis provided a kind of tutorial in the internal dynamics of compassion and a negative starting point for expressing and enacting authentic Christian mercy. In this learning experience, the key was to draw from the false pleasure of a pity directed, at a happy distance, toward tragic characters onstage playing out their mimesis of human suffering, and to move ahead toward a pleasureless mercy that nonetheless embodied real compassion and solidarity with the suffering. And here indeed, in the end, we have one among other splendid instances where Augustine critically but constructively engaged the intellectual *and artistic* culture of his day in order to enrich Christian understanding and moral formation. His insights, in turn, can in their own right enrich what is now a renewed interest, within contemporary Christian theology, in the compatibility of Christianity and the tragic.

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