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ABSTRACT

In his *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor Adorno remarks that "tragedy, which may have been the origin of the idea of aesthetic autonomy, was an afterimage of cultic acts that were intended to have real effects." This statement and its Kantian undertones are the basis for this essay, which will take up the question of the origin of the idea of tragedy in order to elucidate the basis for Adorno's thinking on aesthetic autonomy. I will discuss Kant's concept of human reason and its relationship to the autonomous will and the concept of necessity in order to show that the notion of humanity grounds the idea of tragedy and that without a focus on the human in matters of autonomy, tragedy is a lost art form. Finally, I will undertake to tease out the metaphysical and aesthetic aspects of tragedy in a discussion oriented towards Adorno's relationship with metaphysics and the possibility of removing the Kantian block. The essay will conclude with a reflection on the mourning character of reason and its relation to Adorno's "principle of Auschwitz" with a view to examining the metaphysical grounds for the tragic in modernity.

KEYWORDS

Adorno, Kant, metaphysical longing, aesthetic autonomy, self-conscious reason, sacrifice and tragedy

Art and the Possibility of Metaphysics: Theodor Adorno on Tragedy as the Origin of Aesthetic Autonomy

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Why should art reinforce a thesis which it is the business of deterministic philosophy to advance? The only philosophical laws which have any place in the work of art are those which refer to the meaning of existence.

- Walter Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*¹

Theodor Adorno's definition of the autonomy of art comes to us, in part, from three moments in intellectual history: Hegel's world-spirit, Kant's concept of formal autonomy, and Marx's historical materialism. Adorno retains Hegel's idea that spirit expresses itself in the artwork, contributes Kant's use of reason and autonomy in art's presentation, and fuses these with Marx in order to provide artworks with a social character: "The freedom of artworks, in which their self-consciousness glories and without which these works would not exist, is the ruse of art's own reason."² This relationship between freedom and reason in particular is derived from Kant's concept of *human* reason, which for Kant is what makes a human being an end in himself. Kant's description of us as reasoning creatures is predicated on the idea of human

beings as entities possessing an absolutely free will, or autonomy.³ For Kant, reason allows us to recognize autonomy in others as we assume their assertion of their autonomy *qua* their very existence – to put it another way, we recognize our humanity in them. It is thus our reason that allows us to imbue art with its own claim to autonomy and give to it its own reason in contrast to our own; the possibility of art's autonomy is rooted in the anthropomorphization of art, both as an expression of spirit and as an object for aesthetic contemplation. For Adorno, the artwork also has within its form, in its character as the expression of history and culture, the mediations, or spirit, of the socio-historical past.

In his *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno remarks that "tragedy, which may have been the origin of the idea of aesthetic autonomy, was an afterimage of cultic acts that were intended to have real effects."⁴ This phrase has been essential to my attempt to draw together the various critical projects that motivated his thought because it offers several ideas with which to work. However, it is not immediately clear how tragic artworks, which art historians have traditionally considered in terms of their relationship to their viewers, might be the origin of aesthetic autonomy, especially when one keeps in mind Adorno's prior assertion that the autonomy of art is predicated on its form; in other words "aesthetic form [is] sedimented content."⁵ In this essay, I will focus on the Kantian underpinnings of Adorno's concept of autonomy and apply the Kantian notion of the sublime to the form and content of tragedy in order to illustrate the complex relationship between freedom and necessity that is crucial to explicating reason's correspondence to the human and the tragic in both aesthetic and, I will argue, metaphysical spheres.

Adorno's reference to "cultic acts" indicates that, for him, the tragic was essentially a representation of sacrifice. Particularly in the Odysseus chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the processes of individuation and sacrifice take center stage.⁶ In this chapter, Adorno and his longtime collaborator Max Horkheimer highlight the process of social mediation within individuation and show that the individual's consciousness of autonomy is only to be gotten with self-sacrifice, the sacrifice of one's unblemished creaturely nature, and so the self-consciousness required to cognize autonomy is already a form of unfreedom.⁷ This is contrary to Kant's idea of civilized man, but for Adorno, the figure of Odysseus and the Kantian concept of mind are similarly handicapped by their confrontations with nature, with the difference being that the experience of Kant's transcendental subject is wholly internal to the mind because the experience of sublimity (which, for Kant, is an experience of nature that

causes us to reflect on our own abilities) is only a matter for pure reason. Elucidating the tragic character of reason's limitation is central to understanding artworks and life as *metaphysically* tragic because the so-called purity of form (of artworks and of reason), when considered critically, expresses in fact the absence of organic reconciliation and untrammelled unity within the content.⁸

The process of self-sacrifice is modeled in tragedy, in which what is sacrificed by the drama's own reason is a hero condemned by his inner drive to confront a force beyond his reckoning.⁹ The tragic hero's individuation is part of his or her entity just insofar as he mirrors the physiognomy of the culture that sacrifices him as an exemplar of its own contradictions; the hero in tragedy generally embodies the elements of his or her culture that have become useless for self-preservation and are superfluous or even dangerous to the functioning of the whole society.¹⁰ The hero's will is the catalyst for the dramatic conflict, and the expression of his independence from social expectations is what ultimately dooms him. The hero in the drama takes on the form of the intractable, pure will of primal, animal nature within society and is thus purged from organic nature's civilized counterpart in the name of teleological progress and the corresponding providential view of history.¹¹ With this in mind, I would rephrase Adorno's thesis in the following way: "Because it was the afterimage of cultic acts that were intended to have real effects, the idea of tragedy is the origin of aesthetic autonomy." In its character as a purgative, sacrificial act — intended for an audience from the start — tragedy expresses the power of political reconciliation to the status quo more powerfully than any other art form.¹² The explicitly political content of tragedy, which is reconciliation itself, becomes so solidified in the form of tragedy that the *idea* of tragedy is an unerringly specific one. The idea of tragedy is also expressive of the double character of art insofar as the tragic form can provide a cipher for its own social, moral function, and may be seen to concretize the problem of art's self-consciousness in its claim to true autonomy.¹³

We may glimpse the import of tragedy in its formal characteristics — particularly in the dramatic collision and the unity of time and place. The doctrine of the unities, as it is typically called, is instructive for thinking about the action's claim to necessity: that the collision takes place at just the correct moment, in just the right space, and has the appropriate heft to its destructive power expresses the formal dimension of the artwork's absolute domination of its contents. The formal characteristics fully encircle what may take place and thus lend the action the further weight of

a claim to total import. Tragic art's plea for aesthetic autonomy in spite of its clearly tendentious social meaning expresses the crucial element of its historical decline: as art began to rebel against illusion, the formal elements of tragedy held it fast to an antiquated claim to realistic representation and an uncomfortably close relationship with the ethical sphere.¹⁴ From its initial appearance as relatively straightforward sacrifice to its expression of the social purgation of qualities countenanced by the victim, tragedy assumed a metaphorical character that never fully divorced itself from social function in aesthetic theory because of the general misapprehension of Aristotle's *Poetics* within art criticism. In particular, Enlightenment-era misinterpretations of his idea of catharsis, such as the theory of Gotthold Lessing, doomed tragedy to obsolescence and veiled its social import, for the theory of catharsis leaves it to the audience to determine an artwork's "weight" or "depth." The problem here is that when any audience member lays claim to a meaningful aesthetic experience, it is impossible to know whether this experience was a reaction to the presented artwork or to something else. Adorno shone light on this aspect of tragedy by referring to its truth content, and following his lead, I would assert that the fact that tragedy in the classical sense has gone out of style as an art form might suggest that the relationship of form and content within it engendered its own social irrelevance and thus cleared the way for the concept of tragedy's own autonomy *outside the aesthetic sphere*. Tragic artworks may not be autonomous in their character as artworks, but the concept of tragedy itself transcends its aesthetic bounds and instead takes on a metaphysical character when tragic artworks (and the tragic character of all art) are understood with respect to their cultic function and their correspondence to philosophical contemplation.¹⁵

I want to flesh out why metaphysics is the proper home of tragedy, and again to have recourse to Kant in order to show the relationship between the autonomy of art and the autonomy of the human. This partially entails restating what Adorno does with Kant's idea of reason in attributing it to artworks. The Kantian idea of autonomy is not specific to an artwork's "purposive purposelessness" — in Kant's work, the original designation for something that exists as an end in itself is mankind; only because man has reason can he self-legislate.¹⁶ For Kant, man's autonomy creates necessity in his actions, conformable to an objective moral law because, Kant writes, humankind recognizes the autonomy of others in that they have no price but dignity, which does not allow for exchange or commensurability.¹⁷ Kant believed that as society became more and more constraining, legislative necessity took on an external

character and was no longer a matter for reflection in the life of the private individual.¹⁸

Therefore, because the concept of autonomy itself became dubious, and not in a progressive sense, the reconciliation between individual and society proffered by modern capitalism can be related to tragedy's aesthetic decline. As *Dialectic of Enlightenment* alleges, this skepticism towards freedom did not occur because of an enlightened mankind, fully aware of the contradictions within civilization that are also present in tragedy, but rather because the concept of necessity became absolute in historical-political narratives and eclipsed its own prerequisite, the concept of individual freedom.¹⁹ One need look no further than an American elementary school history textbook to see the evidence of this occurrence – the idea of manifest destiny is perhaps the most poignant example. If we were to encounter a modern Antigone, there would be nothing noble or heroic in her perseverance against the state because our idea of catharsis requires an absolutely innocent victim, or at least one who means well. One might say that we no longer need to purge the absolute human will as first nature from society, that ideology and semblance are now not disparate from what actually is the case.²⁰ In other words, people today are rarely conceded their individuality or even allow themselves an ontological existence deeper than their primary social roles.

Considered aesthetically, art history's focus on catharsis and the didactic quality of tragedy robbed it of its own ability to self-determine and experience organic growth in much the same way that man must sacrifice his inner nature and most intimate desires for social and material self-preservation. Even though tragedy failed to self-preserve, we can see how the art form tried to attain autonomy by turning against itself – most notably in modernist plays, such as those of Samuel Beckett, which Adorno engages with at length. The claustrophobia in Beckett's *Endgame* is a potent reminder of the death of the imaginative play quality of pre-modern theatre. To my mind, in no other art form can we see so clearly how the "other world," which the particular artwork claims to present, both critiques and fails to escape our own reality.²¹ Catharsis in particular is not simply reconciliation to what empirically exists but also indicative of the instrumentalization of art as a whole. The cultic function of tragedy never left it but became explicit in a perverted sense when tragedy became codified as an art form, as a cultic object itself, when art as a whole became the locus for catharsis and reconciliation and tragedy lost its specially delineated function.²²

In order to explain how, precisely because of its artistic obsolescence, tragedy has managed to become so prevalent in the modern vernacular, it is useful here to return to Kant's concept of autonomous aesthetic experience, particularly his description of the sublime. The possibility of tragedy is directly tied to its character as an object of sublimity: "The paradox that genius is born in moral speechlessness, moral infantility, is the sublimity of tragedy."²³ The sublimity of tragedy, for Kant, would be the fact that it evokes in us an idea of itself. This is an idea of which we recognize our own reason as author and that is related to the form of the tragic drama, which is driven by absolute unity and necessity, as well as to the suffering and punishment that constitute its content. The experience of the sublime gives the receiver a kind of feeling for his own reason in its creation of the Ideas — but only if the moral feeling that derives from an awareness of the autonomy of reason is already present. Presumably, it takes a certain amount of personal culture and education to recognize tragedy, and so something has already been sacrificed in the viewer if he or she has a cathartic experience. Thus, for Kant, the moral feeling instilled by education is heightened by the experience of the sublime and enables one to reflect upon the pseudo-supernatural (*a priori*) manifestation of the mind's own abilities that constitutes the sublime experience. Theorists of catharsis claim that something similar occurs in tragedy, insofar as the audience is made to feel as if an experience of fear and pity has given them fortitude. Another layer to this is that the sacrifice of the hero within the play has presumably purified his or her polis, so the audience absorbs the propaganda content along with the aesthetic experience. Adorno goes a step further and shows how, art-historically, the doctrine of catharsis was absorbed into the concept of art, thus art as a whole became a force for purification and reconciliation against its will: "However tragic they appear, artworks tend *a priori* toward affirmation."²⁴

For Adorno, the Kantian treatment of metaphysics expresses human reason's mourning for its own inadequacy.²⁵ Adorno locates the concept of reason in artworks in the concept of Kantian autonomy, and shows that artworks may lay claim to autonomy just insofar as they are limited by their own form, since, as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* shows, autonomy only acquires meaning for the self-conscious entity. Art wills itself to become first nature, and instead becomes second nature by virtue of its own representational character. Analogously, the bounds of reason are not aided by autonomy but rather circumscribed by it insofar as the human mind cannot recognize what is outside its own posited unity.²⁶ Similarly, the "other world," that which reason cannot quite reach but may glimpse in

art, reflects not some mystical otherness but a *posited* beyond. And so the world from which art appears to come to us is in fact always an expression of the mind's dissatisfaction with its ability to reach unequivocal truths. According to Adorno, humans require metaphysics because our reasoning faculties always seek beyond themselves. For the same reason, therefore, we require art. In turn, art requires metaphysics in order to appear to us as coming from this posited beyond. However, in the modern positivist worldview, the possibility of metaphysics has become antiquated. The particular claims of tragedy, in its unity and necessity, have become dead to us because on the one hand, these claims are absorbed into the movement of art itself, and on the other, because tragedy expressed a unity based in part on the concept of the autonomy of the hero as evidenced by the inevitability of his fate, which is not a tenable perspective in a worldview suspicious of the possibility of metaphysics. The doctrine of catharsis gave art scholarship a way out of the problem posed by tragedy insofar as it required tragedy to retain its explicitly political character only for the audience and not in itself. Thus tragedy may have the most to teach us about the potential of autonomy, but it is unable to do so. This is because tragedy was forced to renounce its claims to autonomy by the spurious doctrine of catharsis while absorbing into its form a specifically cultic content-function: as tragedy became art, it became another sort of cultic object under commodity fetishism. Tragedy was once a directly metaphysical ritual undertaking, and has become an expression of what we have attempted to discard as a culture. Tragedy is also a cipher for the problem of human experience both ontologically and also in a way compounded by the over-influence of second nature in the alienation of human beings in late capitalism. Thus, in a certain sense, tragedy itself became a sacrifice to modernity and its ills.

Because artworks relinquished their cultic functions as they became ever more cultic objects, tragedy's import became facile with the banishment of the straightforward in art. This is why an understanding of tragedy is crucial for critical theory. Tragedy, as the expression of sacrifice, retains always in its idea the overt manifestation and implicit glorification, even in the most grotesque of dramas, of second-nature and social custom. Its reconciliatory character is obvious, and so it contains the truth that human beings and social nature are incomplete: culture and society are not hardened totalities but dynamic processes. That a sacrifice is necessary for the drama to be complete expresses the disunity of the world which views it. As a reified aesthetic convention, tragedy tries to lay claim to realism, which expresses the tension between first and second

nature. Kant makes a telling remark on first nature and naïveté in the third critique: “naïveté [is] the eruption of the sincerity that originally was natural to humanity and which is opposed to the art of dissimulation that has become our second nature.”²⁷ In its naïveté, tragedy could very well break the spell of semblance. However, it is prevented from doing so by the forced unity of its formal dimensions. The artwork’s own reason thus rebels against its estrangement from metaphysical truth, an estrangement that results from the tragic artwork’s own form.

The will we possess as human beings is of course the progenitor of our idea that the artwork has an ability to rebel at all. Central to Kant’s idea of human reason is this ability: “the will is a faculty of [thought] determining itself to action in accordance with the conception of certain laws.”²⁸ That man might possess the ability to will something is fundamental to the concept of autonomy for Kant, Adorno, and tragedy. Kant and Adorno share an overall belief in the project of enlightenment as the only path to universal human freedom and happiness. Adorno’s summary of his own teachings is telling: “the premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again The single genuine power standing against the principle of Auschwitz is autonomy, if I might use the Kantian expression: the power of reflection, of self-determination, of not cooperating.”²⁹ Adorno goes much further than Kant and demands that enlightenment make good on its promises by cognizing the sacrifice that has been required in the name of progress. To this end he employs his vast intellectual resources in social critique, and it is in this arena that the practical force of his philosophical argument takes shape.³⁰ I do not think I am remiss in postulating that Adorno did not want the principle of Auschwitz to be understood *tragically*. Certainly, there is an element of his work that seeks to show that social forces produced the events of WWII and that necessity of a certain kind in fact directed history; however this necessity did not originate in the autonomy of individual reason but rather in collective unreason.³¹ Offering a kind of update to Kant’s “What is Enlightenment?,” Adorno states the following:

All political instruction finally should be centered upon the idea that Auschwitz should never happen again. This would be possible only when it devotes itself openly, without fear of offending any authorities, to this most important of problems. To do this education must transform itself into sociology, that is, it must teach about the societal play of forces that operates beneath the surface of political forms. One must submit to critical treatment – to provide just one model – such a respectable concept as that of “reason of state”; in placing the right of the state over that of its members, the horror is potentially already posited.³²

The idea of tragedy, having been hypostatized in the demand for catharsis as constitutive of sublime aesthetic experience, would be inadequate to the principles that underlie the events of Auschwitz. Tragedy as art provides moral tuition in sublimated form, but it is insufficient and platitudinous to say that we must “learn from” the Holocaust. The idea of historical reason and the concept of purification that led to the barbarism of the Holocaust cannot be used to explicate the horror of the events; these ideas must be critically reflected upon, just as the Kantian sublime incites self-reflection. If Auschwitz were to be described tragically, this description would amount to the aestheticization of the actual Holocaust victims’ suffering, turning their suffering into an object for reflection as opposed to an impetus for self-reflection. The reasons for the Holocaust are thereby veiled to thought, for the *idea* of tragedy, having been stripped of its relationship with autonomy, does not lead the mind to reflection on itself, on thought’s complicity in what has taken place.

To attribute any but critical meaning to the Holocaust is to express only the reified semblance of the mind’s necessary inability to partake in metaphysical contemplation, not the possibility of a world in which reason would be able to transcend itself. In a sense, tragedy *is* the “Kantian block.” That tragedy is meaningless to us today suggests a great deal about what kind of creatures we are and what we find worth striving for. Tragedy is not the origin of the idea of autonomy but of *aesthetic* autonomy. In fact, tragedy is based on the idea of autonomy. The possibility of aesthetic autonomy depends on the possibility of tragedy, which depends on the self-conscious recognition of reason’s autonomy, since tragedy is the embodiment of what was sacrificed in man’s acquisition of self-reflective reason.

In this sense we may describe all autonomous actions as tragic expressions. When human agency finds it necessary to *will*, in other words to express the desire that reason should have a stake in objectivity, this is tragedy. And so the Holocaust was not tragic, because even as a reified aesthetic object it fails to demonstrate any concept of necessity, even a hollow one bereft of autonomy. The project of critical theory, on the other hand, expresses the idea of autonomy and necessity immanent to each thinker’s own being and grounds itself in a metaphysics that resists subjectivity as the basis for all actions. In this sense, art and Adorno express an “elective affinity” with reason’s own hopefulness in its orientation towards metaphysical truth.³³

Art is tragic because it takes on, sacrificially, the qualities of nature that have been expunged from the reality of human life in modernity, and so seems to be asserting itself from a place beyond the standardization of society. Its function for criticism is thus its autonomy, understood as its own metaphysical guilt. After Auschwitz, the "guilt context" of the living is manifest in art's bad conscience because even though nothing can be seen as fated or necessary anymore, the promise of this severance from the false demands of historical progress has not been realized: "fate is the guilt context of the living. It corresponds to the natural condition of the living — that semblance [*Schein*], not yet wholly dispelled, from which man is so far removed that, under its rule, he was never wholly immersed in it but only invisible in his best part."³⁴ Tragedy requires the idea of autonomy, which only comes by way of the renunciation of the unreflective illusion of necessity, not from the expulsion of necessity and objectivity from thought. Adorno's lesson is that reason is not to be taken as the only thing there is, therefore reason must continue to yearn for metaphysics, for the possibility of truth.³⁵ The concept of autonomy in human beings would have to be redeemed before tragedy can acquire a new significance, and thus reason's ability to identify a metaphysical "kingdom of ends" for itself is a prerequisite for any autonomy in art. Better still would be the empirical realization of this kingdom of ends, this "other world" that art claims to hail from and that ultimately motivates reason to seek a home beyond dialectics, where the human, the whole, and the real have meaning in the absence of these concepts.

• Notes •

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 1998), 129.

² Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 6.

³ Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals and "What is Enlightenment?"* trans. Lewis W. Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 51.

⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin S. Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 43.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 5.

⁹ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 115.

⁹ Benjamin, "Oedipus, or Rational Myth," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings 1913-1926*, Vol. 1., eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 84-85.

¹⁰ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 210.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 107, 115.

¹² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁴ György Lukács, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 179.

¹⁵ Chris Thornhill, "Adorno Reading Kant," *Studies in Social and Political Thought* 1, no. 12 (March 2006): 98-110, 107.

¹⁶ Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 53.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁸ Adorno, "Philosophy and Teachers," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 34.

¹⁹ Benjamin, "Trauerspiel and Tragedy," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings 1913-1926*, Vol. 1, 55.

²⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 240.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

²² *Ibid.*, 238.

²³ Benjamin, "Oedipus, or Rational Myth," 579.

²⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1.

²⁵ Thornhill, "Adorno Reading Kant," 103.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.

²⁷ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 206.

²⁸ Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 45.

²⁹ Adorno, "Education After Auschwitz," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, 195.

³⁰ Adorno, "Philosophy and Teachers," 35.

³¹ Adorno, "Education After Auschwitz," 193.

³² *Ibid.*, 203.

³³ Thornhill, "Adorno Reading Kant," 109-10.

³⁴ Benjamin, "Fate and Character," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings 1913-1926*, Vol. 1, 204.

³⁵ Adorno, "On Subject and Object," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, 250.

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