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**Michael Trimble, *Why Humans Like to Cry: Tragedy, evolution, and the brain*, Oxford University Press, 2012, 256pp. \$29.95 (Hbk) ISBN 9780199693184**

Andrew Bibby  
Christopher Newport University

Michael Trimble is a neurologist with a special appreciation for the aesthetic basis of the mysteries of the human brain. His most recent book, *Why Humans Like to Cry: The Evolutionary Origins of Tragedy* promises to answer two related questions: 1) why we experience pleasure when watching others suffer, and 2) how this particular form of pleasure explains our consistent fascination with Tragedy.

Before looking at Trimble's argument in detail, it is worth noting that he is also the author of *The Soul in the Brain: The Cerebral Basis of Language, Art, and Belief* (2007). There, Trimble took a self-described "evolutionary approach" to language, art, and religion. That book was limited, however, in that it only broached the theme of the art form of Tragedy, and it did not adequately explain the curious way in which tragic drama elicits in spectators

both pleasure and pain at the same time. This, according to Trimble, is a special phenomenon, which has thus far only been explored from a literary or sociological point of view. *Why Humans Like to Cry* revisits this theme, aiming to provide the first neurobiological account of what Trimble calls—borrowing from Nietzsche—“tragic joy.”

The existence of this emotion is nothing new, and Trimble is well aware that he is not the first to identify the presence of “aesthetic pain,” the fusion of (variously) the sublime, a sense of awe, elevation, or grandeur, with grief or a deep sense of loss. There are, however, many competing explanations for the presence and/or function of tragic joy. One debate centers on the problem of “contextual variability,” or how emotional response vary across cultures, time, and religious traditions (20). Another debate focuses on the problem of why men appear to cry less than women. Trimble’s book takes sides in a different debate, again following Nietzsche’s lead, he attempts to refute those who follow Aristotle in interpreting the human attraction to Tragedy in terms of *catharsis*.

*Catharsis*, as Trimble explains, is an explanation for crying that emphasizes the relief of emotion; and as Trimble points out, this explanation has permeated the literature on Tragedy. According to Aristotle, crying was seen as a beneficial means of getting rid of bad humors (23). The purpose of Tragedy had a moral payoff: it helps to drain off emotional energy, which then leads to a restoration—in Trimble’s words, a homeostasis—within the body. These ideas, rooted in Aristotle, but also influential in early Freudian pre-psychoanalytic theories (23), are the basic building blocks of a modern school of thought that Trimble coins the *physiological recovery hypothesis*. Trimble’s account, by contrast, draws on

Nietzsche and on neuroscience to support what he calls the *physiological arousal hypothesis*. This, as we will see shortly, implies increased emotional activity, including a particular kind of pleasure that is fused with the experience of tragedy in art or drama (24).

Trimble's primary objection to the Aristotelian or physiological recovery hypothesis is based in science—or rather a lack of science. As the chapters go by, Trimble uses anecdotes, surveys, and studies, to chip away at the assumption that crying is physiologically beneficial to one's health as the cathartic model would predict. But if crying is not cleansing, calming, or purifying, what function does it serve? And why do we spend money or time on Tragic drama?

One alternative theory, going back to the aquatic ape hypothesis, suggests that crying was originally an adaptation to saltwater living. Lubricating the eyes gave hominids an adaptive advantage, insofar as the blurring of our vision may have suggested to potential adversaries that the crier was incapable of harm—crying as a “white flag.” An even simpler theory has been proposed, based on the biological explanation that tears simply maintain a healthy eyeball. Emotional crying as ocular hygiene. Although these theories have biological relevance they do not explain why we are attracted to *suffering*, or why it is that humans are unique in their emotional responses to suffering. The dominant sociological account does better. Crying, in brief, has profound communicative value. Child researchers, for example, often refer to infant crying as the “acoustic umbilical cord” (25). This view was pioneered by the Dutch psychologist, Ad Vingerhoets, who spent more than 20 years studying why mammals weep. He concluded that tears are symbols of stress. Crying signals helplessness especially during childhood when humans are most vulnerable.

While these theories align in some respects with Trimble's chapters on neurobiology, Trimble finds them insufficient. The main problem with the sociological explanation of crying is that it does not account for what Trimble calls the *aesthetic basis of crying*, or, the experiences and emotions that one has when enjoying Tragedy. To help explain this mystery, Trimble tries to chart a new course, by weaving together a high-level "summary" of neuroanatomy and the structures of the brain, with the author's own interpretation of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. This is a daunting task, which is not altogether successful (speaking for the non-neurological but interested reader, I can only say that the "brief overview" of the anatomy of the brain (Chapters 2-4), will lose most readers without a degree in neurology or neuropsychiatry). Still, Trimble makes novel use of Nietzsche's views of tragedy.

First, Trimble argues that Nietzsche conceived of tragedy as having its source in music (the full title, as Trimble points out, is *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the spirit of Music*). Music is central to Nietzsche and to the author's thesis because music displaces rational agency as the primary motor in human behavior. Music is also a good metaphor for "tragic joy," since it produces emotions that are difficult if not impossible to categorize (160). The most important aspect of Nietzsche's teaching, for Trimble, concerns Nietzsche's famous and iconic distinction between the Greek gods Dionysus and Apollo. The interplay between these gods is emblematic of the fusion that we find in Tragedy between (Appolonian) beauty and (Dionysian) energy and sadness. While "true tragedy" according to Nietzsche results in the domination of Dionysus, and while Trimble joins Nietzsche in condemning Aristotle for allowing "form" and "order" to reduce the Dionysian element to the background—therefore causing Tragedy to

disappear from the stage—the two are never wholly separated, and this fact serves Trimble’s main contention, namely, that Tragic art evokes emotions that are an echo from our ancient past (163).

While Trimble’s use of Nietzsche is spotty and selective, it is worth reiterating that his main concern is not to understand either Nietzsche or Tragedy, but to understand why human beings find pleasure or joy in suffering. Here the neurologist turns to poetics and in doing so, produces some of the most evocative and memorable passages in the book. It is in the realm of poetry, Trimble argues, that we can most easily see why humans like to cry. Tears function not as catharsis, but to “authenticate meaning.” Tears contain joy because they contain memories of distant times and places, friends and loved ones. Literature taps into each person’s “autobiographical memory” (33), and when arranged in certain harmonious combinations, it helps to arouse what Trimble calls “secondary pleasures.” Tragedy *may* produce catharsis, or it may, as Aristotle argued, allow us to temporarily experience the dangers of some transgression, and therefore teach us basic cautionary tales. But Trimble argues that Tragedy, at a deeper level, produces imaginings—not merely musical stimuli—which then flood the body with feelings of love, hope, compassion, and even joy.

While Trimble’s account has an undeniable bright side, one should also be sensitive to the sharper points of his critique, especially of the Aristotelian and Christian traditions. Indeed, while Trimble’s stated task is to contrast his argument with “purely literary or sociological theories” of Tragedy, one gets the impression that Trimble’s deeper aspiration is to unseat the Aristotelian and Christian understanding of Tragedy. I will not attempt to state what Trimble considers to be the Christian understanding of

tragedy; indeed, there is only one direct reference to Christianity in the book. He does suggest, however, that the Christian view of tragedy is life-denying, and that it involves “hating the world, fearing beauty, and condemning the emotions” (10).

Following Nietzsche, Trimble blames Aristotle for prescribing Tragedy in ways that confined it to a simplistic understanding of the primary emotions of fear and pity. Christianity, while it tends to highlight the sublime, to elevate the audience’s souls, and to invoke or recall a sacred presence, also produces harmful “primeval feelings of guilt, and collective vengeance” (128). Thus, in using Nietzsche’s interpretation of Tragedy, it is clear that Trimble supports Nietzsche’s larger attempt to undermine the classical ideals of Greek Tragedy, and so to knock it from its pedestal (in Trimble’s own words, to put the emotions and “archaic rituals” in the driving seat of human consciousness (117)). Trimble’s purpose is not quite Nietzschean, however. He wants us to remember that it was Dionysus who was the original energy in tragedy, who “set Thebes dancing” (118). Remembering this is supposed to shake us—in Trimble’s words—from our cozy 21<sup>st</sup> century arrogance toward the past, and thus, to help us overcome our unwillingness to acknowledge or accept our biological heritage (147).

In covering so much ground, one is tempted to conclude that Trimble ultimately fails to make good on his two main promises: to explain why we like to cry, and how this relates to the evolutionary origins of Tragedy. Other commentators have suggested that Trimble’s treatment of Nietzsche is superficial. For my part, I do not think it is too harsh to point out that Trimble’s attempts to educate a general audience on the structures of the brain is either comically or tragically bad—depending on one’s perspective.

There is a deeper flaw in the book's presentation, however, and that has to do with Trimble's frustrating inability to explain—clearly and up-front—what is at stake in the whole inquiry. Simply put, one has to work too much to put together the explicit thesis (Tragedy is rewarding because it links us imaginatively with the past and future) with the implicit thesis (Nietzsche and science together uncover the shameful origins of Tragedy, not the noble purposes identified by Aristotle and Christianity). Along these lines, Trimble would do well to outline the implications of his argument more clearly, and then to summarize for the reader why anyone should care about the idea of tragic joy.

Despite these flaws, Trimble has provided readers with a compelling enough reason to re-open the case—not merely on why humans cry, but why we get pleasure from Tragedy, which is, at first glance, an unusual place to expect to find pleasure. Still, one wonders if Nietzsche's philosophy provides the best or only starting point. Here one might just as easily recall the epithet from Italo Calvino (see 152), who noted that all great stories have two faces: the continuity of life, and the inevitability of death. Tragedy produces pleasure not only because it triggers ancient emotions from our mammalian past, but because it reminds us of the pleasures to be had in striving to ensure the continuity of life.