



Tragedy and the Citizen

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In the festival of Dionysus the citizens of Athens assembled in the theatre to witness the suffering and destruction of their heroes. They saw the beautiful Antigone destroyed for obeying the laws of religion and family duty; they saw her father Oedipus self-blinded and her mother Jocasta hanged by her own hand, for a fault that neither could have foreseen or avoided. They saw the horrific murder of Clytemnestra by her virtuous son Orestes and the pitiless torment of Orestes by the furies. And in all this they experienced a kind of unity of feeling, a shared sense of the supreme value of being descended from these exemplary human beings and watched over by the very gods who destroyed them. The Athenian philosophers naturally puzzled over this phenomenon, wondering how it was that people should feel improved and exalted by an experience that ought to have left them dispirited and downcast.

We live in a different world from the ancient Athenians. But we are not differently constituted. We too need to be bound together in

mutual sympathy, and we too find that the easiest way to achieve this is by witnessing good people portrayed in the grip of suffering and death. Our heroes are not as clearly etched by virtues, nor as close to the divine, as theirs were. Our heroes are not, as a rule, connected to the safety of the city or the worship of its gods. Nevertheless some vestige of the tragic emotions remains to us, and like the Athenians we willingly subject ourselves to the shock of feeling them.

Why is this? What is the connection, if any, between the peaceful coexistence of people in a common state, and the ‘pity and fear’ that are, according to Aristotle, the primary emotions experienced in the tragic theatre? If we got rid of tragedy would we lose something of the glue that binds us to our fellow citizens? Or might we be better off without these sad spectacles, able to live side by side more cheerfully?

Those questions are as important to us today as they were for the Athenians. Like the Athenians we recognize that there is a connection, however difficult to understand, between the forms of entertainment and the nature of the society that seeks them. Plato put the point with characteristic exaggeration: ‘the forms of poetry and music are not changed without altering the most fundamental laws of the *polis*’ (*The Laws*). We don’t need to go so far, in order to acknowledge that the fictions that occupy people’s leisure hours have an impact on the feelings that motivate their actions in the public square. It is primarily from fictions, which we can watch and absorb without personal risk, that we learn to exercise our sympathies. It is through witnessing the destruction of fictional characters that we learn to distinguish those who attract our sympathy from those in whose destruction we rejoice. This is surely part of learning to discriminate, as we must, between those whose

friendship we should seek and whose conduct we should emulate, and those whom we should avoid.

But why the need for tragedy? Would it not be enough to entertain ourselves with cheerful comedies, and don't these also provide the opportunity to make discriminations between those who are worthy of our sympathy and those who are not? The answer is not hard to seek. True citizens acknowledge and respond to a deep and rarely visited sense of obligation. They are linked to a community, most of whose members are strangers to them, in an existential bond whose power and purpose is fully revealed only in emergencies. When war, disease or natural disasters strike, the *polis* must defend itself, and it can do so only if the citizens are prepared to risk their own safety for the sake of others whom they do not know. This remarkable trait, which is the core of virtue, does not arise merely because it is needed. It must also be rehearsed. Like many of our most important emotions – love included – it is a learned response, and comes about partly through the exercise of the imagination.

That was surely part of what the Athenians experienced in the tragic theatre. They were rehearsing the kind of sympathy that enables us to respond to another's danger, and to take risks on his behalf. They were binding themselves, in imagination, to a community of feeling, knowing in their hearts the distinction between the worthy and the unworthy person, and wanting to belong with the worthy in his hour of need. It is on such feelings that the long-term survival of the city-state depends, and what is true of the city-state is true of the nation-state also.

We don't easily feel this now, partly because times of danger have become rarer, interspersed with long periods of peace. But if we look back at the 20th century we will very quickly see that long periods of peace are apt to be interrupted by wars of a far greater

savagery than any confronted by the citizens of ancient Athens. We are as dependent as they are, on the ability to confront and survive the critical emergencies. And it is as pertinent for us as it was for them, to ask whether our forms of entertainment are weakening or strengthening the needed moral resolve. When we compare the *Oresteia* with, say, *Wolf of Wall Street*, can we confidently assert that a society whose sympathies are shaped by the second will have the same resilience in the face of threat as a society shaped by the first? The least that can be said is that it matters what we seek by way of entertainment and that it is not merely our own character that is at stake, but also the ties that bind us and the community that depends on them. That, surely, is the lesson of tragedy.