Acknowledgement and the pleasures of tragedy

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'Het is gezien,' mompelde hij, 'het is niet onopgemerkt gebleven.'
(transl. 'It has been seen,' muttered he, 'it has not gone unnoticed.')
Gerard Reve, De Avonden

Abstract:
We take the paradox of tragedy to be characterized by two related questions: why do we pursue art that evokes negative emotions when in life we tend to avoid things that evoke such emotions? Similarly, why do we appreciate tragic events in art in a way in which we don't appreciate tragic events in life? In this paper, we offer an answer that builds on some ideas implicit in Susan Feagin’s 1983 paper The Pleasures of Tragedy. Our suggestion is that tragic art represents a perspective on its content distinct from the viewer’s, from which certain aspects of life are (timelessly) registered, or acknowledged. We take pleasure in sharing this perspective with the work.

1. The paradox of tragedy

The problem we mean to address can be characterized in either one of two ways. The first characterization (after Smuts 2007, 2009), is this: why do people pursue art that evokes negative emotions, when they tend to avoid things that evoke such emotions? The emphasis here is on the disagreeable nature of certain mental states. The second characterization emphasises the disagreeable nature of their causes: why do we appreciate tragic events in art when we don’t appreciate tragic events in life (at least not in the same way)?

We will start with the first question: why do people pursue art that evokes negative emotions, when in general they avoid things that evoke such emotions? The emotions in question include sadness, heartache, feelings of loneliness, disappointment, guilt, shame and regret. Even certain kinds of fear, disgust, shock, distress, anger and indignation are relevant. For brevity, we will sometimes refer to these emotions simply as ‘sadness’ (thereby stretching the ordinary meaning of the term).

In this form, the paradox applies not only to tragedy in a broad sense, including tragedies (in the narrow sense), melodramas, sad songs and so on;

1 Like Smuts, we will sidestep the issue of whether we have genuine emotions in response to art. All that is needed for the paradox is that we have things very much like emotions, some of which are unpleasant, in response to art.
but also to horror. However, we will restrict our attention to tragedy in the broad sense, which we will simply call 'sad art'. Although horror typically evokes negative emotions which are also relevant to sad art (such as fear and disgust), we think its appeal is likely to differ from that of tragedy.

You may think the first characterization of the paradox rests on a false assumption: people may avoid the causes of negative emotions in real life, such as actual loss, but at times they seek out and even enjoy the emotions themselves, such as sorrow or sadness. This is also Smuts’s view.

But how plausible is it that we tend to pursue or enjoy being sad? It seems at least as plausible that we often prefer feeling better over prolonging or deepening negative emotions. That we sometimes pursue such emotions for their own sake is compatible with the first formulation of the paradox. All one needs for that problem to arise is that we tend to avoid things that make us sad, where this is due not merely to their causes.

This brings us to the second question: why do we appreciate sad events in art in a way in which we don’t appreciate sad events in life?² To this it might be objected that we sometimes do appreciate negative events in life. Some of us are prone to Schadenfreude and most of us to Schaulust: people enjoy looking at car wrecks, bullfights, and crucifixions. However, we think there is a kind of appreciation of sad art that does not consist in feelings of this kind.

In this paper, we defend a novel answer to the paradox. Our answer falls into the class of hedonic compensation theories, which hold that the disvalue of the negative emotions we have in response to art is compensated for by pleasure. Its seeds are contained in Susan Feagin’s meta-response theory, an existing kind of hedonic compensation theory (Feagin 1983). The next section describes what we think is valuable in Feagin’s approach; section 3 outlines our own solution.

Note that, like all answers to the paradox, our theory is not intended as a complete explanation of our appreciation of an entire work of sad art or even of a whole scene. It is meant as an explanation only of our appreciation of an aspect of such works, specifically the sad nature of their content.

2. The meta-response theory re-considered

Feagin’s meta-response theory says that although we experience negative emotions in response to art (the ‘direct response’), we take pleasure in the fact that we have such emotions. For instance, we take pleasure in the fact that we are the kind of beings who feel pity for Oedipus. Smuts’s main objection to the theory is that this kind of ‘prideful’ meta-response is extremely rare as a response to sad art (Smuts 2009).

We agree. If this reading of Feagin’s proposal is right, the pleasures of tragedy should be comparable to those felt when giving to charity. Although awareness of one’s altruistic nature can make one feel good, it is doubtful that our appreciation of sad art has much to do with this. King Lear does not appear to induce satisfaction with one’s own moral nature.

² Putting the question in terms of ‘appreciation’ allows us not to prejudge whether pleasure is involved. As we explain below, our own solution does posit pleasure as part of our response to tragedy.
But we are not sure that this is all Feagin had in mind. Her discussion contains two disparate strands of thought, only one of which is subject to these problems. Smuts’s critique is based on passages like the following:

‘But whence the pleasure [derived from tragedy]? It is, I suggest, a meta-response, arising from our awareness of, and in response to, the fact that we do have unpleasant direct responses to unpleasant events as they occur in the performing and literary arts. We find ourselves to be the kind of people who respond negatively to villainy, treachery, and injustice. This discovery, or reminder, is something which, quite justly, yields satisfaction.’ (Feagin 1983, p. 98)

Here, Feagin describes the meta-response as a kind of pleasure taken in the fact that we are moral creatures, capable of pity for and empathy with others. But the continuation of this passage points to a different idea:

‘In a way it [the fact that we have certain emotional responses] shows what we care for, and in showing us we care for the welfare of human beings and that we deplore the immoral forces that defeat us, it reminds us of our common humanity. It reduces one’s sense of aloneness in the world, and soothes, psychologically, the pain of solipsism.’ (Feagin 1983, p. 98)

There is a reading of this latter passage which still makes it vulnerable to the previous objection. If the idea is that we are pleased to respond collectively in morally valuable ways, this can still be thought of as self-congratulatory. But a different reading is this: we are pleased not to be alone, to be part of a sympathetic community of people. We are not the only ones who feel a certain way; we share certain responses.

We think this idea is considerably more promising than that of taking pleasure in the moral quality of our collective responses, or in the fact that they are central to morality and the ‘existence and maintenance of human society’ (Feagin 1983, p. 104).

However, the meta-response theory faces a more damaging, phenomenological objection. When consuming and enjoying a work of sad art we do not seem to reflect on our responses to its content. Similarly, we do not seem to reflect on the fact that others share our responses to the work.

What then of Feagin’s insight that the pleasures of tragedy centrally involve a ‘soothing of the pain of solipsism’? In what follows we try to articulate a view that preserves this insight without falling prey to the phenomenological objection.

3. The acknowledgement theory

Feagin’s key insight is that in experiencing the sad events portrayed in a work, we gain the sense that we are, in some sense, not alone. Works of sad art convey a sense of shared awareness of certain aspects of life. How can this be if we don’t ordinarily reflect on our own or anyone else’s responses to the work?
Our answer is as follows. A work of sad art makes us feel less alone in our awareness of certain aspects of life, not because other people respond to them negatively too, but because it acknowledges those aspects. Acknowledging something ordinarily involves recognizing it, giving it its due, giving it credit, honouring it, or doing it justice. A work does this by the very selection of its subject matter and by the stance it takes towards it: it provides a standing occasion to respond with negative emotions to certain events. It thereby conveys that those events are significant to more than just oneself, and gives one the sense that they have been seen or registered, that they have not gone unnoticed. In this way, the work functions as a perspective on its content which is distinct from the viewer’s, from which certain aspects of life are acknowledged. That is how it creates the sense of shared awareness. To be pleased by this, all you have to do is focus on the work, not on other people.

In this respect, works of sad art have much in common with monuments to real life tragedies. The difference is that since sad art typically touches on universal themes, it ‘commemorates’ not only specific events, but general aspects of life.

Acknowledgement by a work of art can feel different from ordinary instances of acknowledgement by another person. Art has a certain timeless quality: when something is part of the content of a work of art, it's almost as if it has been registered from the point of view of the universe. This is soothing because it gives us the sense that certain aspects of life are timelessly significant.

To illustrate, consider Robert Herrick’s poem To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time (‘Gather ye rosebuds while ye may...’). Part of its appeal may lie in its injunction to make the most of youth and to enjoy life while it lasts, which is a positive message. But we think that another aspect of the poem is somber: it is about mortality, the passage of time, and the inevitability of old age and infirmity. We think the appeal of these somber aspects is at least partly explained by the sense that they have been registered by someone other than oneself. That someone is not Robert Herrick, and it isn’t the person sitting next to us at the poetry recital. Rather, it is the poem itself as something which acknowledges our mortal predicament.

4. Conclusion

We have articulated an answer to the paradox of tragedy that builds on Feagin’s insight that sad art can make us feel less alone or ‘soothe the pain of solipsism’. Our suggestion, in a nutshell, is that such art represents a perspective on its content distinct from the viewer’s, from which certain aspects of life are (timelessly) registered, or acknowledged. We take pleasure in sharing this perspective with the work.

References