

A CHRISTIAN AESTHETICS OF JUSTICE:
TOWARD THE REVERSAL OF OUR OWN TRAGIC FLAW

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Introduction

Sophocles' 5th century BCE epic of Oedipus, and the construct of Greek tragedy as a whole, has recently become the object of philosophical and theo-political examination, particularly as it relates to Christian aesthetics.¹ The aesthetic view, it is argued, is formative for the Christian's view of the world, philosophy or *Weltanschauung*. To be more precise, the literature of Greek tragedy has been foundational in the formation of the Western mind whether its embrace has been conscious or unconscious. In the case of the tragic hero Oedipus, the Western subject gazes upon this character at the end of his life, bleeding from the eyes and blind, condemned to wander the world in darkness as a result of his tragic flaw, in this case, hubris. Oedipus, we think, has brought this upon himself; it was his own flaw that set into motion the course of events that now lead to his demise. What is more, the Western reader understands Oedipus to be, in some way, a hero in his tragedy, to embody the heroic tendencies in his own pain and suffering. And yet, the aesthetic holds: Oedipus *must* suffer, for in his suffering Oedipus is beautifully lifted to heroic status.

In what follows, we will examine the ways in which both biblical and Christian theological narratives provide those who have been formed by such an aesthetic an alternative vision of tragedy, and in particular, suffering. It will be seen that an aesthetics of suffering and justice as informed by biblical and theological sources provides a better way of glimpsing the beatific vision of the coming Kingdom as proclaimed in Luke's gospel. Such a glimpse will provide Christians with a new vision of suffering in which the recipient of tragedy resists the title of hero as it is understood in a Greek literary context. Instead, a Christian aesthetic of tragedy names suffering for what it is and posits a hope that suffering will be redeemed rather than glimpsing suffering through the lens of a glorified romanticism which names the tragic sufferer as hero.

Aesthetics in the Service of the Church

A possible question at the outset of this project involves the necessity of speaking of beauty as it relates to the Church's vision of justice and suffering. The Church has long maintained an aesthetic tradition which has formed and guided its understanding of what the Church's participation will entail. Augustine, for example, envisioned the observation of the beautiful as more than a distant appreciation, but as an energetic, dynamic participation with and in that which attracts our attention. "Our attraction to the beautiful object is a directional pull, drawing us toward itself, and thus it serves as both inspiration and guide," writes Robin Jensen

¹ See, for example, David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004) or Creston Davis, John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek, eds., *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

(Jensen 2004, 7). To take the pull of aesthetics seriously, then, is to take seriously that to which we are drawn.

This aesthetic pull, it can be argued, is what drew Rowan Williams to make it the topic of his 2005 Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge (Williams 2005). Working from the thought of Aristotle, Plato and Aquinas, Williams argues art, and its inherent vision of beauty, never simply imitates that which it seeks to describe. Rather, the beauty of the art makes a metaphysical claim, that truth is not necessarily found in the object the art describes, but in the transcendence of the object altogether. That is, art does not seek to describe things precisely as they are, but to describe things as they should be, to apply truth to the observation of the artist. “Art challenges the finality of appearance here and now, the actual ‘conditions of existence’, not in order to destroy but to ground, amplify, fulfil [sic]” (Williams 2005, 21).

David Bentley Hart, who has written extensively on the topic of Christian aesthetics, argues forcefully for the place of aesthetics in the conversation of Christian theology. “Beauty,” he writes, “is a category indispensable to Christian thought; all that theology says of the triune life of God, the gratuity of creation, the incarnation of the Word, and the salvation of the world makes room for – indeed depends upon – a thought, and a narrative, of the beautiful” (Hart 2002, 16). Carefully woven into a Platonic understanding of beauty, Hart’s argument (among others) have argued that to glimpse the beautiful is to glimpse that which is also most true, to glimpse that which participates most fully in the divine. To phrase it simply, the aesthetics to which we ascribe makes a difference for the Church’s beatific vision. To hold a flawed aesthetics is to hold a false understanding of suffering and tragedy. One vision allows the Church to glimpse the beautiful; the other participates in a false narrative, misleading the Church to see beauty where none actually exists to be seen.

The remaining question, then, is to examine and pursue constructions of beauty which fulfill truth, rather than advancing a beatific vision which seeks only to describe, to make beautiful the profane and to command the status quo as normative. Much art, Greek literary tragedy in particular, fails to move beyond the descriptive task, to advance a vision which moves the observer beyond false narratives and to make truth central in the artistic process. To follow this vision is to participate in a distorted vision of truth and, subsequently, justice.

This essay calls into question constructions of beauty and art which include those things which are not conducive to Luke’s vision of the coming Kingdom of God. Taking Plato seriously, it presupposes that true beauty has its source in the divine. As such, we will examine carefully a false aesthetics of which the Church in the West has been a recipient with the express concern for discerning the “directional pull” of this aesthetics. It is toward that vision of loveliness which we now turn.

The Aesthetics of Tragedy in Western Literature

Much of literary history in the West has been heavily influenced by the aesthetics of the Greek model of tragedy. While the exact origins of this mode remain obscure, the ways in which the form has filtered into Western literary history are clear. The earliest Greek tragedies took the form of epic poetry and often concluded in the demise of the poetic hero. Aristotle gives what is

perhaps the most complete account of classical tragic form. “Tragedy, then, is an imitation of some action that is admirable, entire, and of a proper magnitude – by language, embellishment and rendered pleasurable, but by different means in different parts – in the way, not of narration, but of action – effecting through pity and terror the correction and refinement of such passions” (Aristotle 1957, 230). Tragedy, in its purest form, is understood by Aristotle to be that which evokes a response on the part of the observer. The horror, shock and surprise of the tragic hero’s flaws, on display for all to see is that which speaks to the observer in some way, presumably to expose the observer’s own tragic flaw for the purpose of moral transformation.

Aristotle notes that pity will be the likely result of observing tragedy in its Greek formulation. To gaze upon the tragic hero is to avail oneself to the emotive response of observing such misfortune. In an effort to heighten this response, Greek productions of certain tragedies often employed a wooden cart which contained dramatic evidence of the tragic hero’s demise. Scenes of gore or murder made regular appearances on this ‘stage set’ which was wheeled to the front of a stage at the conclusion of the production or during other strategic points during the play. In effect, Greek audiences were moved to a deep sense of pity for the tragic hero. Oedipus, for example, is seen at the end of his epic reduced to a troubling spiral of vicious and criminal behavior, coupled with the disturbing images of his eyes being stabbed out, forcing him to wander blindly through the remaining rubble of his life, a literary device with strong emotive potential.

This, Aristotle argued, is tragedy in its highest form. Aristotle found more value in characters passing from good fortune to bad fortune rather than the reverse, precisely because an observation of this process results in a sort of catharsis or emotional cleansing on the part of the audience. Thus, gazing upon the suffering of the other became constitutive of the Greek aesthetic of tragedy. To be certain, beauty was found in this literary device, prompting even Aristotle to engage in the prescriptive activity of outlining tragedy in its purest form.

At the same time, however, the pity for the tragic hero was accompanied by what Aristotle termed “admirable action.” Such action was held in esteem in Greek culture; though the tragic hero is one to be pitied, he also heroically provides an example from which the audience can learn. In the actions of the tragic hero, though they lead to his demise, the audience becomes poignantly aware of the hero’s sacrifice and, as such, lifts up the hero in high regard so that tragedy itself is more than a sequence of unfortunate events. The hero is to be pitied, but is also to be sorrowfully admired from a distance. He is to be glimpsed, but not embraced. In the glimpsing of the tragic hero the observer holds up the misfortune of the hero as a mirror in which he or she can examine his or her own fortune, precisely because the suffering of the distant hero has made this juxtaposition possible. Thus, the hero is one to be concomitantly pitied and admired, to be seen, but not touched, to be glimpsed, but not embraced. Therein lies the beauty of the tragic hero: he is one who is offered up in unwilling misfortune to be gazed upon, pitied, and admired, for his misfortune has become a warning to others who have yet to suffer misfortune of their own.

The Greek tragedy has informed much of Western literature, well into the Elizabethan period and into contemporary literature, most notably in the work of William Shakespeare. *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* are formed in

the tradition which was passed on to the West's greatest playwright. In the same way, then, the tragic antagonist in each of these works is to be simultaneously pitied and admired in his or her suffering.²

It was this aesthetics of tragedy which led Nietzsche to argue for its necessity, particularly in the life of the individual. "With his sublime gestures," Nietzsche writes, "[the tragic hero] shows how necessary is the entire world of suffering, that by means of it the individual may be impelled to realize the redeeming vision, and then, sunk in the contemplation of it, sit quietly in his tossing bark, amid the waves" (Nietzsche 1968, 45-46). To play out the logic of the Greek aesthetics, Nietzsche argues that tragedy is necessary for the full realization of the individual's potential. Redemption, argues the German philosopher, comes in the "delimiting of the boundaries of the human potential" (Nietzsche 1968, 46) seen most fully in the demise of the tragic hero, glimpsed under the lights of the stage from a comfortable seat in the audience. In the beholding of the hero's suffering, the individual finds the beauty of humanity, according to Nietzsche. Thus, the tragic hero becomes the recipient of laud, though it is spoken quietly in whispers amongst members of the audience long after the performance has concluded and the theatre has been darkened. The hero, however, is left to his suffering. It must be this way, goes the logic, for only in the hero's suffering can we admire him from afar and in so doing, gain a glimpse of our own humanity.

Such is the nature of the Greek tradition of tragedy. For the tragic aesthetic vision to be realized, the suffering and misfortune of the other becomes a necessary and constitutive presupposition. Tragedy does not, indeed *cannot*, insist upon the relief of the hero's pain. Rather, the hero's purpose is to suffer at a distance so that we might glimpse him with pity, and in so doing, behold the aesthetic vision of heroic suffering. Thus, it is only then that the hero's life can have any effect. "Sophocles understood the most sorrowful figure of the Greek stage," writes Nietzsche, "the unfortunate Oedipus, as the noble human being who, in spite of his wisdom, is destined to error and misery but who eventually, through his tremendous suffering, spreads a magical power of blessing that remains effective even beyond his decease" (Nietzsche 1968, 47).

What then, are we to say about a literary aesthetic which upholds the necessity of suffering in its concept of beauty? Are we left to affirm, with Nietzsche, that the beauty of truth comes shining through as we look upon the suffering of the other, appalled, yes, but also quietly

² Hegel has argued that tragic theory takes a decisive turn after Shakespeare in which the radical individualism and subsequent inevitable character flaws of the Greek hero are replaced by a multiplicity of choices. That is, in Greek tragedy, the character is flawed in his or her very nature and therefore cannot do anything other than live with the tragic consequences of "a self-contained ethical pathos." Modern tragedy, on the other hand, allows more space in the individualism of the character, "such that congruity of character with outward ethical aim no longer constitutes an essential basis of tragic beauty." See Hegel, ed. Glockner, Vol. XIV pp 567-8. Hegel's analysis, while sufficiently insightful, does little to alter the trajectory of the argument at hand. The modern hero itself continues to be pitied just as much, if not more so, than ancient Greek tragic heroes, especially as the radical individualism of the modern character is seen as endemic to the character's downfall.

affirming the heroic nature of the sufferer? It is in the necessity of the suffering for the sake of beauty that exposes this beauty as a false aesthetic.³ It is in the necessity of the suffering that does not allow us to name suffering for what it is. The tragic concept of suffering ultimately stands to benefit the observer, and the observer is prompted to lift up the sufferer as a hero, regardless of the sufferer's intentions in his or her suffering. In the logic of the Greek tragedy, tragedy necessarily involves the suffering of one who is gazed upon and admired, though pitied, from a distance precisely for their suffering. Suffering, in this logic, is assumed to be necessary for the good of the whole and for the good of all who gaze upon the folly of the hero's tragic flaw. This, in the logic of tragedy, is thought to be beautiful.

This logic, we think, does not move the Christian toward an aesthetic of truth, let alone an aesthetic of justice. A Christian aesthetics does not allow the observer to view the suffering of the other as beautiful. Instead, a Christian aesthetic names suffering for what it is and glimpses beauty in the prevention and relief of suffering. In the face of global suffering, a Christian aesthetics cannot gaze upon injustice as "tragic," silently pitying those who suffer, but continuing to think that this suffering is all but necessary to the way things are. Rather, in the interest of redemption a Christian aesthetics begin by naming suffering for what it is.

*The Aesthetics of Kingdom Reversal in Luke's Gospel*⁴

At first glance, the gospel of Luke does not advance an aesthetics. Luke's comments on beauty are limited to one verse in the entirety of the gospel, that being only a passing reference.⁵ At the same time, this inference to beauty is intimately coupled with the coming of the Kingdom. What is more, the disciples' remarks about the beauty of the temple in 21:5 and Jesus' response in 21:6 suggest that the beauty of the temple will be replaced by a beauty which will surpass that of the temple. Even as the disciples behold the splendor of the temple, Jesus has already begun to initiate a new, more splendid establishment. While the beauty of the temple is reserved to the jewels its walls boast, the beauty of the coming Kingdom will be holistic, complete and full.

³ At this point, an obvious critique is that the Incarnation most certainly involved suffering at an aesthetic level. That is, Christ's suffering becomes beautiful as it is redeemed and offers redemption. While I do not seek to deny the suffering of Christ, I do want to challenge atonement theories which are based upon a Greek aesthetic of the tragic hero. The Greek tragic hero suffers precisely because of a fatal flaw within the hero's nature; to apply this concept to the crucifixion, however, leads us toward satisfaction or substitutionary atonement theories which cannot be examined in any detail here, but which are generally rejected in contemporary Wesleyan theological circles. We should also note that Christ's suffering and death must be held together with the resurrection at some level, an aspect of suffering which is absent in Greek tragedy.

⁴ We will also pay limited attention to Acts in the interest of seeing how certain themes emerge through the whole of the Lukan corpus.

⁵ Luke 21:5-6: Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, "As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down."

It could certainly be argued that this passing reference is not enough upon which to establish a ‘Lukan aesthetics,’ a critique which would certainly be upheld. Indeed, Luke’s purposes are much more concerned with the prophetic nature of Christ’s ministry than any vision of beauty that Christ is initiating. However, if we are to maintain the argument of this project, the prophetic ministry of Christ in Luke’s gospel is indeed beautiful. That is, as Christ’s ministry gives us a glimpse of divine activity, we see that this ministry is truly filled with beauty, especially as it works to fulfill the work of the Kingdom. Luke understands this work as basic to the establishment of a new Kingdom, as a kind of ‘grand reversal’ to the powers as they stood. What we will see in this section is that this grand reversal provides the Church with an alternative aesthetics of justice, a vision of beauty which maintains the relief of suffering as participation in divine activity. In this alternative vision of loveliness, the relief of suffering is understood to be beautiful precisely because it participates in the beauty of divine love.

This grand reversal is evident from the beginning of Luke’s gospel, particularly as Luke establishes Jesus in a long history of prophets who had come before him. Establishing Jesus in the Mosaic line immediately conjures connotations of Jesus’ ministry as a prophetic ministry in which Jesus is one who prepares a new way and who calls a people to a new way of life.⁶ To think of Jesus’ life and ministry as prophetic in the line of those who have called Israel out is to think also of Jesus’ ministry as one which calls a people to an alternative way of life in faithfulness. In this tradition, the visitation of a prophet brings with it the kind of change that is often foundational and quite unexpected. Luke clearly indicates that the visitation of Jesus as prophet brings with it the shaking of societal foundations: poor become rich, the lowly are raised up and those who seek to justify themselves are ultimately undone. Thus, a new vision is cast before the eyes of those who have eyes to see, and the vision is beautiful indeed.

The aesthetics of justice in Luke-Acts, unlike those of John or Matthew, are much less apocalyptic than many of the other writings in the New Testament. The ‘apocalyptic urgency’ that can be found in the other gospels is hardly detectable in Luke-Acts, particularly in Luke’s record of Paul’s ministry to those who were not believers. Instead, Luke regularly regards those outside of the faith with respect, even portraying them as acting with kindness and forgiveness.⁷ Therefore, the prophetic mission of Jesus in Luke’s gospel is not one of complete destruction as is the case in Matthew or John’s Revelation. In Luke-Acts, unconverted persons and structures need not be destroyed from the ground up. Rather, the prophetic mission as seen in Luke’s gospel is one of reversal, of turning ‘the way things are’ into ‘the way they should be’. The prophet Jesus, then, comes to bring change through reversal rather than complete obliteration of culture. Jesus’ threefold blessing/woes in Luke 6, for example, give us an understanding of this concept. Rather than commanding or foretelling the downfall of those who are rich, Jesus simply reverses the blessings over against the curses. For each blessing pronounced there is an equal and opposite woe spoken, not in the sense that those who are rich will be toppled in a violent coup, but that as the Kingdom emerges, those who are rich and those who have already received comfort will have received their last. In a reversal of their having received comfort, the emergence of the Kingdom brings with it the necessary reversal of the natural flow of society.

⁶ Luke 2:22, ff.

⁷ Acts 28:7-10.

Therefore, it is precisely in this grand reversal that the Kingdom becomes evident and the beauty within begins to shine forth.

If Jesus' ministry is seen in this light, the vision of prophetic reversal in Luke-Acts can be understood in aesthetic terms, especially as it "affirms the value of human culture simply by the beauty of its fashioning. By shaping the Good News into literature, Luke implies the compatibility of Christianity and culture" (Noel 1996, 4:417). While Luke sees beauty in human culture, Luke glimpses a more beautiful vision in the 'prophetic reversal' of Jesus' ministry. In the coming of the Kingdom, in the God's acceptance of those who have been cast out of society, the most beautiful vision can be seen and a Kingdom aesthetics of justice begins to come into being. Though Luke sees beauty in the formation of society and does not demand its destruction for the emergence of the Kingdom, Luke does see a beatific vision on the eschatological horizon, a dazzling view of magnificence in which the beauty of divine love transcends, upends and reverses even what is understood to be beautiful in human society. In this alternative aesthetics, the unattractiveness of poverty, suffering and oppression is reversed by the coming of the prophet Jesus and the outpouring of divine love so that in the redemption of the repulsive, beauty can be glimpsed. This theme is seen again and again in Jesus' healing of the demon-possessed man (Luke 8), the healing of the ten lepers (Luke 17), and so on. Jesus, the prophet who brings change, reverses the position of those who were cast out and hideous and restores them to beauty – and in this reversal through restoration, the beauty of the Kingdom in which justice thrives can be glimpsed most clearly.

Luke 4 advances further this understanding of a Kingdom aesthetics in Luke's gospel. As the chapter opens, Jesus is enduring the temptations of the devil, who, in verses five and six, shows Jesus "the kingdoms of the world" in all of their "splendor," (στιγμη) or shining beauty. Again, Luke does not deny that the kingdoms of the world are beautiful but affirms that they are indeed splendid. As the passage unfolds, however, Jesus responds by denying the tempter's proposition, citing that the worship of anything but God is not relevant. In this passage, we see that Luke is setting a kingdom motif, juxtaposing the offering of the splendid kingdoms of the world with the Kingdom which Jesus has come to establish. On the one hand, the offering of the tempter contains a certain beauty, but the beauty of these kingdoms does not participate in the divine life in the same way as does the Kingdom in which the oppressed are released and thus is not as beautiful as Jesus' Kingdom. To view this passage from the standpoint of a Platonist-informed aesthetics, then, is to see that the more beautiful option is the one which participates more fully in the divine life, freeing the prisoners and giving sight to the blind.

Verse 14 records that Jesus came to Galilee "in the power of the Spirit," a point which cannot be overlooked in this passage. Jesus' subsequent reading of the Isaiah scroll, then, is done in conjunction with the Spirit, in full participation with divine activity. The preaching of good news to the poor and the recovery of sight for the blind is done precisely because the Spirit is upon Jesus and in his action, divine activity is being fulfilled. In Jesus' Spirit-anointed ministry, the full activity of the divine nature can be glimpsed, and in Jesus' proclamation of good news to the poor, the full intention of the Triune God, and the beauty of this intention's effects, can be seen. This is how life will be in the new Kingdom, we see, and the beauty of participation in the divine life sets this kingdom apart from all others.

The Kingdom aesthetics in Luke's gospel place one aesthetics of splendid kingdoms over against the beauty of a Kingdom of divine participation. It is an aesthetics of reversal in which the suffering of the oppressed is overturned and upended. In this beatific vision, the beauty of the Kingdom is not in its ornate adornment, but in the ways that redemption arises from the rubble of oppression and suffering. In the beautiful Kingdom of divine participation, goodness, truth and beauty are seen in the Kingdom's reversal of the status quo.

It should also be mentioned at this point that this Kingdom aesthetics must take suffering seriously for this aesthetics to be at all possible. Suffering, in this mode, must be named, seen, and understood so that the reversal of the Kingdom might actually be a reversal of a serious issue. Jesus' selection from the Isaiah scroll has no intention to dismiss suffering as unrealistic or as having no substance. Rather, the people Israel truly endure suffering, as is seen in the cries of the prophet. Jesus too understands that suffering is not an imagined problem. Suffering is not something to be gazed upon and taken as granted for Jesus, but it is something which is to be reversed in the new Kingdom. And in this taking seriously of suffering, reversal becomes possible.

A Christian Aesthetics of Justice

Beauty for the Christian is not subjective. Beauty, according to the terms of liberal Western thought, can be identified in the eye of the beholder, a suggestion which presupposes an autonomous individualism, radical in its nature. Beauty as we conceive of it in this essay, however, is measured by the degree to which it is divine. Plato's language certainly requires rearticulation if we are to call it into our employ for the purposes of advancing a Christian aesthetics of justice, but the concepts remain very much in place. Beauty is that which describes the degree to which a person, object or action participates in the divine life of the Triune God. Therefore, a Christian aesthetics of justice names beautiful, good and true those activities which participate most fully in the Kingdom of Jesus' establishment. In this Kingdom, good news is preached to the poor, the oppressed are made free and the blind are restored to sightedness. This, we think, is beauty beyond splendor.

A Christian aesthetics of justice beckons the Church into a beautiful vision of the Kingdom in which the beauty of the Kingdom is not based upon anything other than the grand reversal and redemption of suffering. In this vision of beauty, the Church glimpses the beauty of the Kingdom as it participates in the divine life of the Triune God, preaching good news to the poor, freeing the oppressed and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor. In this vision of beauty there is no room for a sustained suffering. Rather, the place of suffering in this vision is only in its redemption. As the suffering of the other is redeemed, there the beautiful vision of the Kingdom of reversal can be glimpsed.

Further, a Christian aesthetics of justice does not allow one to look upon the suffering of the other and see in it any beauty. Rather, a Christian aesthetic of justice moves the Church beyond naming suffering as 'tragic,' for tragedy in the Western mind connotes a heroic sufferer who unwillingly suffers so that others might gaze upon his or her suffering for some amount of

benefit.⁸ The tragedy of the hero's situation is located in his or her suffering, and as such cannot stand in the vision of the Kingdom which reverses oppression and suffering. In this vision, the Christian can no longer see suffering as tragic, if 'tragic' suggests that the suffering of the other somehow lifts them to heroic status. Such an understanding of tragedy allows the Christian to gaze upon the sufferer and too easily romanticize the suffering he or she sees. In this (false) vision, one is allowed gaze upon the person who is homeless and to lift his or her suffering to a tragic result, silently acknowledging that this suffering must, in some way, be necessary as an example, evoking a pitiful sorrow, but never reaching the ecstasy of redemption. In this mode, the plight of the other is thought to be tragic and easily lends itself to romanticization in the observer's brief encounter with the sufferer. The one who momentarily encounters poverty, the one who glimpses injustice, the one who gazes upon sidewalks lined with temporary housing from a lofty building above all find a certain ease in describing their vision as tragic. In the fleeting encounter with the tragic the observer becomes the recipient, a ticket-holding member of the audience to Oedipus' downfall, and the tragedy itself is understood to be beautiful. The sufferer is pitied, to be sure, but from a distance, and only inasmuch as the suffering of the tragic hero offers to the observer some romantic warning of things to come. The observer glimpses the other, beholds their plight, and tells the tragic story of this suffering hero who unwillingly endures pain so that the observer might gain an experience of some romantic meaning.

In this mode, the beauty of the tragic situation is located in the experience of the observer, in the pity that is expressed or in the warning that the observer receives. As we have seen, however, this nihilistic vision of beauty has no other options but to be turned in upon itself, to lead the observer only back to another experience of tragedy from which he or she might garner some moral or lesson. It does little or nothing to advance the redemption of suffering, the reversal of things as they are or the establishment of things as they should be. Again, this vision of beauty makes the observer the recipient of some gift at the expense of the sufferer, a voyeuristic exploitation of the tragic hero's suffering.

A Lukan ethic of reversal, however, challenges the assumption that beauty is present in the retelling of the tragic hero's story. Rather than silently admiring the pitiful and suffering hero, the prophet Jesus establishes a Kingdom in the beauty of divine participation. The location of this Kingdom is found precisely in those places where suffering is given its difficult name, seen for what it truly is, reversed and redeemed. The beauty-filled redemption of suffering does not come in the retelling of the sufferer's tragic story for the benefit of the observer, but it comes in the reversal of its very existence, in the overturning of its effects, justified sustainability and systemic causes. This is beautiful, we think, because this is a more full participation in the life of the Triune God as exhibited in Jesus' establishment of the Kingdom in Luke-Acts.

⁸ One may think of contemporary examples in the context of Christian Evangelicalism in which students participate in short-term missions, for example, only to return with many stories of the tragic plight of the poor they have witnessed and how this witnessing has given the student a new perspective. This exchange, however, runs the danger of placing the student firmly in the role of the observer of the tragic hero and recipient, rather than making the oppressed person the recipient of the overturning of his or her oppression.

As the Church seeks to embrace a Christian aesthetics of justice, beauty of divine participation becomes the ultimate result. The false aesthetic of the tragic hero is exposed as untruthful beside the Church's witness of reversing and redeeming the suffering of the other. In this vision of beauty, the Church can no longer speak of tragedy as it is perceived. That is, a Christian aesthetics of justice does not permit the Church to tell stories of tragedy for its own ephemeral benefit. Rather, the Church is moved from the mode of tragedy to the mode of suffering, of doing the hard work of naming suffering and of knowing that only in suffering's reversal can it be redeemed. And in the horrible, grotesque face of suffering, beauty begins to emerge as suffering meets a robust reversal. This, and only this, can be the "good news to the poor," for only in the redeeming reversal of suffering is the sufferer no longer the tragic hero who is hesitantly but surely admired from a distance.

A Christian aesthetic of justice sees true beauty in the reversal of suffering because in this relief, therein is participation in the life of God. This participation requires that we, with Jesus, take seriously the reality of suffering, but immediately go to the work of robbing suffering of its ontological reality by affecting its reversal and thus its redemption. In its redemption, suffering moves from serving its own nihilistic purposes to serving the purposes of the beatific Kingdom of reversal in which the Church participates and to which it witnesses. As the Church moves from treating and observing tragedy toward naming, reversing and redeeming suffering, the witness to the beautiful Kingdom stands.

The aesthetics of Greek tragedy find no place in the Kingdom Jesus has established and initiated. The Church, if it wishes to participate in and witness to this Kingdom must seek to move away from seeing tragedy to seeing suffering, for tragedy finds (false) redemption only in its own conclusion. A Christian aesthetics of justice, on the other hand, locates (true) beauty in the redemption, reversal and upending of suffering. Beyond evoking pity within the observer, those who participate in the Kingdom glimpse suffering, name it as it is, and go about the work of reversing it. No room is left for the romantic uplifting of another's suffering – this vision of beauty prevents it at every turn. Beauty breaks in only as the Church participates in the life of the Triune God who comes to make all things beautiful, to make things as they should be, to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind and to release the oppressed.

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