Theological Aesthetics after von Balthasar

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Chapter 3

Transcending the Aesthetic: Gadamer on Tragedy and the Tragic

Daniel L. Tate

In *Truth and Method* Gadamer considers tragedy and the tragic to be “exemplary of aesthetic being.”1 I intend to develop this claim along several complementary lines. First, I will argue that tragedy and the tragic provide Gadamer with a decisive counter-example by which to expose the reduction of “aesthetic being” under the purview of the “aesthetic consciousness.” Initially, I highlight the critical import of tragedy and the tragic by showing how they serve to challenge the presumptive universality of the aesthetic consciousness and the supposed self-evidence of the aesthetic dimension it supports. This challenge turns on the retrieval of art’s claim to truth. In tragedy Gadamer finds “a unique manifestation of truth”2 that belies the contemporary condition of “aesthetic alienation” in which, according to Jay Bernstein, art finds itself “having lost or been deprived of the power to speak the truth.”3 Tragedy and the tragic are “exemplary” for Gadamer precisely because they resist appropriation by the aesthetic consciousness and thereby transcend the aesthetic dimension wherein art is divorced from truth. The truth that addresses us in tragedy makes a claim upon us as spectators such that we are drawn into an event of being that takes place in the work of art. Due to its claim to truth tragedy cannot be adequately conceived as an aesthetic phenomenon.

Further, I show that Gadamer’s understanding of art’s claim to truth is developed with deliberate reference to tragedy and the tragic. In fact, I argue that his hermeneutic ontology of the work of art is, in crucial respects, an appropriation of Aristotle’s theory of tragedy. The central sections of this essay therefore offer a

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3 J.M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p. 4. According to Bernstein’s usage, the term ‘aesthetic alienation’ ‘denominates art’s alienation from truth which is caused by art’s becoming aesthetical ...’
reconstruction of Gadamer's reading of the Poetics. Above all, his retrieval involves a re-interpretation of the mimetic dimension of the tragic work of art. For Gadamer, this does not consist in "imitation," at least not if that is conceived as the reproduction of an original. Instead he understands mimesis as a presentation (Darstellung) in which something comes to presence so that it may be known and recognized in its true being. Aristotle, however, ties mimesis to both mythos and katharsis. On the one hand, mimesis requires the mythos or plot by which the narrated events are unified into a meaningful whole. Gadamer also holds that mimetic presentation involves a structure or configuration (Gebilde) by which it acquires the unity and ideality proper to the work of art. He thus retrieves the correlation of Darstellung and Gebilde from the association of mimesis with mythos in Aristotle's account. On the other hand, Aristotle holds that the telos of tragedy consists in the katharsis of the tragic emotions. Responding in pity and fear, the spectator takes part in the tragedy by enabling the tragic truth of the depicted events to be presented and recognized as such. But the katharsis also involves a recognition of who we are that marks a transforming moment of self-knowledge. Gadamer retrieves this too, holding that recognition and self-recognition characterize the spectator's engagement in all art and not just tragedy.

Finally, I indicate how Gadamer's hermeneutic understanding of the work of art emerges from his interpretation of Aristotle's theory of tragedy. For Gadamer, the spectator's participation is considered essential to the being of the work. Responsive to the work and its claim to truth, the spectator belongs to the work of art. For this reason the role assigned to the spectator in Aristotle's definition of tragedy becomes pivotal to Gadamer's appropriation. Hermeneutically conceived, the work does not truly exist apart from this participation; it only "is" in its enactment. The work of art is now understood as an event of being in which a presentation takes place. Thus Gadamer's interpretation of the Poetics associates mimesis with the presentation that takes place in the work of art. What takes place is a "happening of truth" ("Wahrheitsgeschehen") that only occurs where the spectator actively takes part in the presentation of the work. Claimed by the work, one undergoes a genuine experience that does not leave the participant unchanged. The experience of art therefore involves the spectator in a claim to truth that is at once mimetic and cathartic, revelatory and transformative. For Gadamer, these characteristics are exhibited by the tragic artwork in an exemplary way. Insofar as it serves to "legitimate the knowledge of truth that occurs in the experience of art," tragedy transcends the aesthetic. Gadamer's interpretation of the Poetics thus appropriates Aristotle's theory of tragedy for a hermeneutic ontology of the work of art.

I

In Gadamer's estimation it is necessary to go beyond the dominant aesthetic concept of art and question the self-evidence of its supposed autonomy. "As soon as the concept of art took on those features to which we have become accustomed and

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4 Gadamer, TM, p. 84; WM, p. 100.
the work of art began to stand on its own, divorced from its original context of life, only then did art become simply ‘art’ in the ‘museum without walls’ of Malraux. Art becomes “art” when it is conceived as an exclusively aesthetic phenomenon. But the purity and immediacy that mark the aesthetic are achieved only by removing everything considered extrinsic to the “aesthetic quality” of the work. “By disregarding everything in which the work of art is rooted (its original context of life, and the secular or religious function that gave it significance), it becomes visible as the ‘pure work of art.’” The “pure” work of art is thus the product of a process of abstraction that Gadamer attributes to the “aesthetic consciousness.” To experience the work “aesthetically” is to abstract from the work any “extra-aesthetic elements” that still cling to it, thereby differentiating the “pure” work of art from its purpose, function and even the significance of its content. Gadamer insists that this is an “aesthetic differentiation” inasmuch as it “distinguishes the aesthetic quality of the work from all the elements of content that induce us to take up a moral or religious stance towards it, and presents itself solely by itself in its [pure] aesthetic being.” Thus the aesthetic consciousness develops a concept of art as “art”—and nothing more. But, for Gadamer, art is more than “art.”

To do justice to art, he contends, it is necessary to abandon the abstractions of aesthetic consciousness and to transcend the “purity” of the aesthetic. This is especially true of the great art of the western tradition. “As far as so-called classical art is concerned,” Gadamer observes, “we are talking about the production of works which in themselves were not primarily understood as art.” Works of classical art were embedded in the functional contexts of life where they served different purposes, be they secular or sacred. Thus it is anachronistic (Gadamer calls it a “modernism”) to think that these works have therefore been subverted by another, alien purpose that renders them aesthetically “impure.” On the contrary, we find the religious or political function of classical works of art integrated into their very existence as works. Just as such works refuse aesthetic alienation from the life-world they likewise resist aesthetic abstraction of the “pure” artwork from its significant content. For Gadamer, it is hardly irrelevant that ancient tragedy belongs to one of the ages in the history of western art which neither cultivated aesthetic consciousness nor developed our modern concept of art, but gave rise to creations whose sacred or secular function was integral to their meaning and understandable by all. Indeed, tragedy provides the key example by reference to which he exposes the abstraction of aesthetic consciousness.

Gadamer observes that the tragic is a “basic phenomenon” of aesthetic being that, as a “structure of meaning,” not only exists in tragedy but in other artistic genres too (for example, epic). It is, moreover, found in life as well as art. For this reason, the

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5 Gadamer, RB, p. 19; KA, p. 110.
6 Gadamer, TM, p. 74; WM, p. 91.
7 Ibid.
8 Joel Weinheimer, Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 84.
9 Gadamer, RB, p. 19; KA, p. 110.
10 Gadamer, TM, p. 70; WM, p. 87.
tragic is not an exclusively aesthetic phenomenon. In modern thought (Gadamer cites Richard Hamann and Max Scheler) the tragic has often been considered “extra-aesthetic,” a moral and metaphysical phenomenon that enters into the sphere of aesthetic problems from outside. However, such an outlook is shaped, implicitly or explicitly, by the principle of aesthetic differentiation. But the modern concept of the aesthetic as an autonomous domain does justice neither to the tragic, which it presents as purely aesthetic, thereby ignoring the ethical and religious import that is crucial to its nature, nor to the aesthetic, since the phenomenon of tragedy clearly shows that aesthetic being always transcends the confines of “aesthetic autonomy.” Where the principle of aesthetic differentiation prevails, it is impossible to do justice to tragedy and the tragic. To reclaim the truth to which tragedy attests it is therefore necessary to transcend the concept of the aesthetic as an autonomous dimension that first emerged in the late eighteenth century and came to pervade our understanding of art.

Gadamer turns to the example of tragedy and the tragic in order to recover art from these distortions because they embody the “principle of aesthetic non-differentiation” that, in his view, properly characterizes aesthetic being. From this perspective, the aesthetic consciousness is merely a “secondary procedure” that restricts us to a “purely aesthetic evaluation.” Abstraction of the artwork both from its original context of life and from the spectator precludes any meaningful access to the work. The aesthetic consciousness thereby fails to account for the capacity of art to address us, to “say” something to us about ourselves and our world. In short, it abstracts from art’s claim to truth. And yet in tragedy, as in all art, “it is the truth of our own world—the religious and moral world in which we live—that is presented before us and in which we recognize ourselves.” The aesthetic consciousness thus reduces the experience of art by alienating us from this deeper engagement with the work of art and its claim to truth. In the experience of art we are caught up in an event of truth in such a way that we belong to it. We thus find ourselves claimed by the work and responsible to what it says. Tragedy attests to such an experience of art because the participation of the spectator is essential to the tragic as a basic phenomenon of aesthetic being.

In order to make the case that tragedy exemplifies “the structure of aesthetic being as a whole,” Gadamer appeals to the account of tragedy that Aristotle sets forth in the Poetics. He finds that Aristotle’s definition of tragedy opens up “the whole scope of the tragic phenomenon,” especially where it refers to “the arousal of pity and fear effecting the katharsis of such emotions.” For Gadamer, this is Aristotle’s “decisive contribution” to our understanding of aesthetic being precisely because he includes the effect on the spectator in his concept of the tragic work of art. By this inclusion Aristotle confirms that the spectator is the one to whom the tragedy is addressed and with whom it achieves its proper completion. What comes to presentation in the tragedy—namely, the tragic—is thus presented for and recognized by the spectator.

11 Gadamer, RB, p. 29; KA, p. 120.
12 Gadamer, TM, p. 124; WM, p. 133.
13 Gadamer, TM, p. 125; WM, p. 133.
14 Aristotle, Poetics c. 6 (1449b 28–9).
whose participation is integral to the “work-being” (Heidegger) of the tragic work of art. Gadamer’s retrieval of Aristotle’s Poetics seeks to overcome the limits of aesthetic consciousness by recovering an understanding of tragedy that exemplifies the hermeneutic structure of aesthetic being.

II

The Poetics is governed by the concept of mimesis which Aristotle develops with specific reference to tragedy and defines as the “imitation of action.” Despite the constriction this imposes, Gadamer seeks to retrieve mimesis for his interpretation of art. “For when it is correctly understood,” he avers, “Aristotle’s fundamental concept of mimesis has an elementary validity.” Gadamer’s appropriation, however, abstracts from the reference to action in Aristotle’s definition. Mimesis, he claims, essentially consists simply in “letting something be there.” In mimetic presentation something comes to presence so that it may be identified as the being it is; hence it is only through the presentation that one knows who or what is presented. The mask in ancient drama, for instance, is not intended to hide the actor, but rather to present the hero; it is Oedipus we are meant to see there. As Gadamer writes, “when Aristotle describes how the onlooker knows ‘that is who it is,’ he does not mean that we see through the disguise and know the identity of the person dressed up. On the contrary, he means that we know who is presented.”

Thus mimesis is presentation (Darstellung) in which something comes to presence so that it can be recognized and known for what it is.

Gadamer’s appropriation of Aristotle’s understanding of mimesis is subject to a further qualification. Aristotle construes mimesis in terms of mythos which he defines as the “structuring of events.” Typically translated as “plot,” mythos is the principal work of the poet whereby the events are organized into a unified whole that depicts the “single action” presented in tragedy. By unifying the recounted events mythos thus secures the intelligibility of the action. Gadamer does not adopt Aristotle’s definition of mythos in the Poetics, no doubt because it ties the work of art too closely to the narrative structure of tragic plots. Instead he deploys the broader concept of a structure or configuration (Gebilde) whereby what is presented acquires the unity and ideality proper to the work of art. What Gadamer does adopt, however, is the interrelation of mimesis and mythos which, for Aristotle, are strictly complementary terms: the “imitation of action” (mimesis) is largely a function of the “structuring of events” (mythos) created by the poet. Following Aristotle, Gadamer holds that mimetic presentation (Darstellung) is possible only by virtue of its ideal structure (Gebilde) while the ideality of the work only finds its fulfillment in mimetic presentation. Gadamer’s interpretation thus finds the principle of aesthetic

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15 Gadamer, RB, p. 97; KA, p. 31.
16 Gadamer, RB, p. 119; KA, p. 83. Due to the centrality of this concept for Gadamer’s account, I will consistently translate his use of ‘Darstellung’ by ‘presentation’ (despite the frequent resort to ‘representation’ in English translations of this term in his work).
non-differentiation embodied (albeit implicitly) in the correlation of *mythos* and *mimesis* in the *Poetics*. Indeed, the “non-differentiation” of *Gebilde* and *Darstellung* in Gadamer’s discussion of art appropriates the “quasi-identification” of *mythos* and *mimesis* in Aristotle’s theory of tragedy.\(^{18}\) Even as I adopt Gadamer’s own focus on *mimesis*, its essential correlation with *mythos* must be kept in mind. In the following paragraphs I show how Gadamer’s appropriation reasserts the “elementary validity” of Aristotle’s concept of *mimesis* as matter of *transformation*, *presentation*, and *recognition*.

As the distinguishing trait of tragic poetry, *mimesis* does not mean “imitation”—at least not in the sense of a copy of an original that is already given. Instead Gadamer maintains that, for Aristotle, *mimesis* marks a *transformation* in which what is presented is affected by its very presentation. “All true imitation is a transformation that does not simply present again something already there. It is a kind of transformed reality in which the transformation points back to what is transformed in and through it.”\(^{19}\) That which is “imitated” is transformed by the artist’s “imitation” into a meaningful whole intended for an audience. The integral relation of *mythos* to *mimesis* in Aristotle’s account of tragic poetry suggests just such a transformation. As an artificial construct, the plot possesses a unity, definiteness, and necessity one does not find in the action it imitates. These qualities of the poetic construct “reflux,” as Thomas Prufer says, back upon the imitated action, thereby unifying, defining and ordering the action itself. Thus, “the artificial imitation refluxes on the imitated action as imitated, as itself represented in and through the ordered imitation. The spectators gaze upon the action itself as represented in and through the transforming and embellishing artifact constructed by the poet.”\(^{20}\) What is imitated is formed—and so transformed—by its very imitation.

Gadamer calls this the “transformation into structure” ("*Verwandlung ins Gebilde*") and it marks the ideality of the work as a repeatable configuration. Such transformation pertains to the tragic drama as a work of art. For it is as a work that art “transforms our fleeting experience into the stable and lasting form of an independent and internally coherent creation [*Gebilde*].”\(^{21}\) Through such transformation the action of the drama is, Gadamer says, “lifted out (*herausgehoben*) of the ongoing course of the ordinary world” and “enclosed in its own autonomous circle of meaning” such that “no one is prompted to seek some other future or reality behind it.”\(^{22}\) As an independent structure of meaning, a *Gebilde*, it no longer permits any comparison with reality and so resists being measured by any criterion of verisimilitude. As a transformed world, the world of the work refers to nothing outside itself by which its veracity might be measured. “It is raised above all such comparisons—and hence

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19 Gadamer, *RB*, p. 64; *KA*, p. 302.
21 Gadamer, *RB*, p. 53; *KA*, p. 142.
above the question as to whether it is real—because a superior truth speaks from it.” Gadamer writes, “reality is defined as what is untransformed and art as the elevation (Aufhebung) of this reality into its truth.”

This retrieval of Aristotle’s theory of tragedy yields Gadamer’s central claim about mimesis—namely, that it is a transformation in which a presentation (Darstellung) of true being takes place. For Aristotle, the unifying structure of the plot renders action intelligible by enabling us to recognize patterns of probability and necessity that constitute the “poetic universals” to which he alludes. But poetry does not simply see the universal as if it were already given; it rather makes the universal “spring forth.” The imitation transforms the reality imitated by highlighting and clarifying what it imitates thereby revealing what would otherwise remain hidden and withdrawn. In short, imitation reveals the true essence of the thing. According to Gadamer, “imitation enables us to see more than so-called reality. What is shown is, so to speak, elicited from the flux of manifold reality ... It is no longer just this or that thing that we can see, but it is now shown and designated as something.”

Thus the relation between the imitation and what it imitates cannot be reduced to a relation of resemblance. However, this does not entail that the imitation bears no relation to the truth of what it imitates. Pruefer confirms this point: “The imitated action is heightened and sharpened by the imitation into being more truly itself than it would be if it were not imitated and thus made available for contemplation through the transforming imitation.” Mimesis is therefore no mere imitation, a simple duplication of reality; it is rather a “bringing-forth,” a presentation in which what is brought forth is the true being of what is presented. For Gadamer, “the situation basic to imitation ... not only implies that what is presented is there, but also that it has come into the There more authentically.”

In Aristotle’s account the composition of the plot is responsible for bringing forth the “poetic universals” from the particular actions it imitates. But Gadamer’s retrieval of mimesis goes further in its emphasis on the role of the spectator who he sees as co-responsible for such bringing forth. “The ‘known’ enters into its true being and manifests itself as what it is only when recognized.” Recognition (Wiedererkenntnis) here does not mean simply seeing something again with which we were previously acquainted. Instead, recognition involves the joy of knowing more than what is already familiar. It is, as Aristotle holds, a genuine learning experience in which we achieve an understanding of something that, up to that moment, had eluded us. “In recognition what we know emerges, as if illuminated, from all the

23 Gadamer, TM, p. 112; WM, p. 117.
24 Gadamer, TM, p. 112; WM, p. 118.
25 Ricoeur, Time and Narrative I, p. 42.
26 Gadamer, RB, p. 99; KA, p. 32.
27 Gadamer, RB, p. 129; KA, p. 91.
28 Pruefer, Recapitulations, p. 19.
29 Gadamer, TM, p. 114; WM, p. 120.
30 Gadamer, TM, p. 114; WM, p. 119.
contingent and variable circumstances that condition it; it is grasped in its essence. It is known as something.”31 To recognize something as something is to let what is presented become manifest in the presentation and thereby known in its true being. As cognition of the true, recognition therefore involves an act of identification “in which we do not differentiate between the presentation and the presented.”32 Only when it is recognized in the imitation, and thereby identified as something, is the imitated brought forth so that it becomes manifest in its truth. For Gadamer, “there is no doubt that the essence of imitation consists precisely in the recognition of the presented in the presentation.”33 Since recognition fulfills the non-differentiation of presentation and presented, Gadamer holds the spectator to be integral to the mimetic process of bringing something forth.

III

Gadamer goes further in retrieving the essential role of the spectator. Referring again to the Poetics, he emphasizes that Aristotle’s definition of tragedy “included its effect [Wirkung] on the spectator.”34 This effect involves the tragic emotions of pity and fear and their katharsis. Aristotle believes pity and fear to be a correlated pair of emotions that are only fully evoked by the tragic action presented in the tragic drama. As Ricoeur observes, “fear and pity are inscribed in the events by the composition insofar as it moves through the sieve of the [poet’s] representative activity.”35 Thus the tragic emotions are constructed in the work where the plot presents the events as pitiable and fearful.36 But no matter how well it is composed, the tragedy only achieves the effect proper to it if its presentation arouses pity and fear in the spectator. Aristotle states that pity “has to do with the man who undeservingly suffers misfortune” and fear with “the man like us” who suffers such misfortune.37 These sympathetic feelings are aroused in the audience by the affinity created with the tragic figures. By effecting a “mimetic identification” of the spectator with the tragic hero, the tragic emotions elicit recognition of the vulnerability of humanity and the conditions of existence that we share in common.

Although Gadamer does not sufficiently underscore the point, the mimetic identification established by the tragic emotions is precisely what enables the spectator to recognize the tragic dimension of the events depicted. Here, as Gadamer maintains, the spectator completes what the tragedy as such is. For only in pity and

31 Gadamer, TM, p. 113; WM, p. 119.
32 Gadamer, RB, p. 99; KA, pp. 31–2.
33 Gadamer, RB, p. 99; KA, p. 31.
34 Gadamer, TM, p. 126; WM, p. 134. Gadamer’s emphasis.
35 Ricoeur, Time and Narrative I, p. 50.
36 Aristotle gives special attention to those elements of the plot that enhance their pitiable and fearful quality: metabole, the drastic change of fortune (from happiness to unhappiness) due to an unforeseen calamity; reversal (peripeteia) and recognition (anagnōrisis), plot devices that heighten the emotional response by concentrating the tragic shift in one shattering moment.
37 Aristotle, Poetics c. 13 (1453a 5–6).
fear is the truth of the tragic course of events disclosed as tragic. Only through the tragic emotions is it possible to recognize the tragic depth of what has transpired. Here we see how such recognition belongs to the sort of knowledge proper to mimesis: what is revealed is the true being of the tragic and that truth is further revealed as one that must be suffered rather than cognized. To know the tragic dimension of life is not to grasp its content in concepts and propositions, but to endure its horror in pity and fear. What tragic knowledge teaches above all is the fragility of human existence and its exposure to that which exceeds our capacities for action and knowledge.

"In tragedies we are reminded that we live in a world larger than that of our own making or control, and yet a world to which we are answerable." Gadamer finds this insight expressed in Aeschylus’s motto: “learning through suffering” (“pathei mathos”). By suffering the disappointments and deceptions of experience what one learns is the uncertainty of plans and predictions, the futility of efforts to control the future, and the frustration of totalizing conceptions. It affords us insight into human finitude. Through suffering, Gadamer says, one gains “insight into the limitations of humanity, into the absoluteness of the barrier that separates man from the divine. It is ultimately a religious insight—the kind of insight that gave birth to Greek tragedy.”

Gadamer believes, however, that we misconstrue pity and fear if we consider them to be merely psychological states. Indeed, we miss the profound insight conveyed by tragic wisdom if we render the tragic emotions as subjective responses. Indeed, Gadamer argues that the traditional translation of eleos and phobos as “pity” and “fear” carry connotations that are far too subjective. Neither should be understood as inner states of mind; rather “both are events that overwhelm man and sweep him away.” Eleos is not the self-regarding emotion typically associated with pity. “Eleos is the misery [Jammer] that comes over us in the face of what we call the miserable.” Likewise, “phobos is not just a state of mind but, as Aristotle says, a cold shudder that makes one’s blood run cold . . .” In its correlation with eleos,

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39 Gadamer, TM, p. 351; WM, p. 363. Martha Nussbaum stresses this barrier in the alliance she forges between Aristotle’s ethics and Greek tragedy. “The great tragic plots explore this gap between our goodness and our good living . . . They show us reversals happening to good-charactered but not divine or invulnerable people, exploring the many ways in which being of a certain good human character fails short of sufficiency for eudaimonia.” (Martha Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 382.)

40 Gerald Else criticizes Aristotle’s construal of pity and fear, arguing that Aristotle’s account of the tragic emotions rests on fraudulent correlation (we fear in our own case what we pity in others) that renders them too self-regarding. In his view, Aristotle reduces pity and fear to moral feelings and thus flattens their true tragic dimension. Although Gadamer would undoubtedly agree with Else’s positive description of the tragic emotions, he does accuse Aristotle of misrepresenting them or their correlation. (Gerald Else, Plato and Aristotle on Poetry, ed. Peter Burian (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), p. 142.)

41 Gadamer, TM, p. 126; WM, p. 135.
“phobos means the shiver of apprehension that comes over us for someone whom we see rushing to his destruction and for whom we fear.” Eleos and phobos are thus “modes of ekstasis, of being outside oneself, which testify to the power of what is being played out before us.”\textsuperscript{42}

I would argue that, for Gadamer, Aristotle’s description of the tragic emotions underscores the mode of being proper to the spectator. The tragic drama must be presented to the spectator, but this does not dissolve the drama into the subjective experiences of those watching it. Rather, the contrary is true: “the being of the spectator is determined by one’s ‘being there present’ (Daseinsein).”\textsuperscript{43} Being present in this sense does not merely mean being there along with something else; it means participating in the mimetic presentation of the tragic events. As a closed structure of meaning the tragedy does not of course invite intervention. The audience is set at an “absolute distance” from the tragic events as they unfold on the stage that “precludes any practical or goal-oriented participation.” Nevertheless, this “signifies the distance necessary for seeing and that makes possible a genuine and comprehensive participation in what is presented before us.”\textsuperscript{44} Watching a tragic drama is therefore a genuine mode of participation insofar as one is “totally involved in and carried away by what one sees.”\textsuperscript{45} The tragic emotions mark the moment of rupture and dispossession in the experience of tragic truth (just as their catharsis marks, as we shall see, the moment of reconciliation and affirmation). Being present thus has the character of being outside oneself. But such an ecstatic condition should not be construed as the mere negation of being composed within oneself. Instead, “being outside oneself is the positive possibility of being wholly with something else.” Being present thus involves a self-forgetfulness that consists in giving oneself over to what one is watching. For Gadamer, then, eleos and phobos constitute the ecstatic mode of being present proper to the spectator of tragedy; they attest to the participation of those who are borne away by the presentation of the tragic events.

The fact that Aristotle’s definition of tragedy includes its effect on the spectator confirms for Gadamer that the spectator belongs essentially to the playing of the tragic play. That tragedy has a certain effect on the spectator is not incidental, but integral to the tragic. And the same is true for aesthetic being in general. “The spectator is an essential element in the kind of play we call aesthetic.”\textsuperscript{46} The “aesthetic distance” that determines the way in which the spectator belongs to the play is an element of tragedy. But the distance inherent in being a spectator has nothing to do with the principle of aesthetic differentiation. “The spectator does not hold himself aloof at the distance characteristic of an aesthetic consciousness, enjoying the art with which something is represented, but rather participates in the communion of being present.”\textsuperscript{47} Thus the spectator’s distance from the tragedy is not reducible to a subjective act of the aesthetic consciousness; it is rather an “essential relation” determined by the tragic

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Gadamer, \textit{TM}, p. 121; \textit{WM}, p. 129.
\textsuperscript{44} Gadamer, \textit{TM}, p. 124; \textit{WM}, p. 133.
\textsuperscript{45} Gadamer, \textit{TM}, p. 122; \textit{WM}, p. 130.
\textsuperscript{46} Gadamer, \textit{TM}, p. 125; \textit{WM}, p. 133.
\textsuperscript{47} Gadamer, \textit{TM}, p. 128; \textit{WM}, p. 137.
as a structure of meaning. As a unified structure the tragic drama "is a closed circle of meaning that of itself resists all penetration and interference." Consequently, the spectator can do nothing but watch as the tragic events unfold and behold in misery and horror the oncoming catastrophe. Yet it is precisely by being present that the spectator attests to the inevitable course of these tragic events. Gadamer's retrieval of Aristotle's theory of tragedy thus underscores the essential relation between the mimetic presentation and the spectator's participation. The mimetic presentation heightens the pitiable and fearful quality of the tragic events it presents thereby intensifying their impact on the spectator; carried away in pity and fear, the spectator experiences the tragedy as a meaningful whole and recognizes the tragic truth it reveals.

IV

According to Aristotle, the telos of tragedy is achieved with the katharsis of the tragic emotions. Hence the "proper effect" of tragedy consists in the peculiar pleasure that "derives from pity and fear" and yet is produced "by means of imitation." On the one hand, Aristotle stresses the importance of the poetic "imitation," even treating the katharsis as a function of the plot which structures the pitiable and fearful events. On the other hand, Aristotle also understands katharsis as a "purification" of the tragic emotions that has its seat in the spectator and consists in the transformation of the pain inherent in these emotions into the pleasure distinctive to tragedy. Although sometimes treated independently by commentators, I follow those interpreters who, like Paul Ricoeur, hold that these two aspects of tragedy are complementary: while the katharsis is experienced by the spectator, it is also "constructed in the work by the mimetic activity." Without diminishing the import of the poetic composition, however, Gadamer's discussion addresses only the "subjective alchemy" (Ricoeur) of the cathartic experience.

On Gadamer's reading, tragedy effects the "purification" of pity and fear as the emotions strictly associated with the tragic. Despite issues of translation, Gadamer believes that by katharsis Aristotle means the "tragic pensiveness" that overcomes

49 As Gadamer says: "What is understood as tragic must simply be accepted" (TM, p. 126; W.M, p. 135).
50 Aristotle, Poetics, c. 14 (1453b 12–3).
51 Ricoeur, Time and Narrative I, p. 50. Ricoeur understands katharsis as a purgation that is effective both 'inside' the poetic work and 'outside' in the spectator. Indeed, he argues, 'the dialectic of inside and outside reaches its highest point in catharsis. Experienced by the spectator, it is constructed in the work'. (Ibid., p. 50.) Else, however, detaches catharsis entirely from the spectator, arguing for an 'objective' interpretation according to which katharsis pertains solely to the imitated events which are 'purified' of any 'polluted' intent. (See Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1957), pp. 423-47.) Gadamer, however, emphasizes the katharsis undergone by the spectator. My reconstruction follows Ricoeur's 'dialectical' interpretation and sees Gadamer's account as deepening our understanding of what the purification of the tragic emotions means for those witnessing the tragic drama.
the spectator at a tragedy. He describes such pensiveness as a condition of relief and resolution in which pain and pleasure are mixed. The vexing question is: "How can Aristotle call this condition one of purification?" What is the "impure" element in feeling and how is it removed or "purified" in and through the tragic emotions? Gadamer's answer is that "being overcome by misery and horror involves a painful division." Overwhelmed by the tragedy presented before us we recoil in the face of the catastrophe that overtakes the tragic hero and reject the inevitability of the tragic course of events. "There is a disjunction with what is happening, a refusal to accept that rebels against the agonizing events." And yet, Gadamer asserts, "the effect [Wirkung] of the tragic catastrophe is precisely to dissolve this disjunction from what is." He holds that the removal of this painful division is the source of the pleasure that Aristotle attributes to tragedy as its proper effect. Thus the purification of the tragic emotions is what enables us to reconcile ourselves to the tragic. "We are freed not only from the spell in which the misery and horror of the tragic fate had bound us, but at the same time we are freed from everything that divides us from what is."\(^{52}\)

For Gadamer, such tragic pensiveness involves a kind of reconciliation in which we come back to ourselves. Torn outside ourselves by the power of the tragic events, overtaken by the misery and horror that they provoke, the cathartic effect enables the return to ourselves from this ekstasis in order to face the truth of what is. To admit, accept, and finally affirm this truth is the meaning of katharsis. But what exactly is affirmed here? Certainly it is not the justice of a moral world order. As Gadamer notes, "tragedy does not exist where guilt and expiation balance out, where a moral bill of guilt is paid in full." Instead it is the very imbalance of guilt and fate that marks the events as tragic. For the essence of the tragic is characterized by the excess of tragic consequences. "Obviously it is the disproportionate, terrible immensity of the consequences that flow from the guilty deed which is the real claim upon the spectator. The tragic affirmation is the fulfillment of this claim." Such tragic affirmation involves self-recognition and has the character of a genuine communion. "What is experienced in such excess of tragic suffering is something truly common. The spectator recognizes himself and his own finiteness in the face of the power of fate." Through the suffering of the tragic hero, we are compelled to face our own vulnerability to disaster, exposure to suffering, and powerlessness before fate. Accepting that "this is how it is" is a kind of self-knowledge for the spectator "who emerges with new insight from the illusions in which he, like everyone else, lives."\(^{53}\)

Gadamer turns to Aristotle's discussion of katharsis precisely because it is here that the recognition of who we are takes place in Greek tragedy. According to the Poetics, such recognition is both a function of the mimetic presentation and an experience that the spectator undergoes. The mimetic presentation of the tragic events enables the spectator to recognize, for instance, that Oedipus is the one who, driven by some implacable fate, brings the very catastrophe upon both the city and

\(^{52}\) Gadamer, TM, p. 127; WM, p. 136.

\(^{53}\) Gadamer, TM, p. 127; WM, p. 136. (This citation applies to all quotes from Gadamer in this paragraph.)
himself that he seeks to avoid. But by eliciting pity and fear the tragedy of Oedipus also enables the spectators to recognize that their lives too are delivered over to fateful forces they cannot ultimately control. Hence Gadamer holds that there is more to recognition than the cognition of essence. “For it is also part of the process that we recognize ourselves as well.”

The self-recognition afforded by the tragedy rests upon the “mimetic identification” with the tragic hero whose fate arouses the spectator’s pity and fear. Gadamer writes: “in the traumatic experience of the tragic, an act of identification, a deep and disturbing encounter with ourselves overcomes us.”

Here, as spectators who are genuinely present to the tragedy, we come to an insight about ourselves, about the extreme possibilities of human action and the concealed limits of human knowledge. Amidst the misery and horror of the tragic catastrophe we encounter ourselves in the cathartic recognition that “This is you.” We not only recognize the full scope of the calamity that has befallen Oedipus, but we also see ourselves in the empty sockets of his eyes as human beings who are likewise exposed to suffering and ruin.

On Aristotle’s account, the mimetic identification attains its highest pitch when the reversal of fortune occurs at the same moment that the tragic hero discovers who he is. In this terrible moment Oedipus encounters the fate he has tried so desperately to evade; he now recognizes himself to be the murderer of his father and husband to his mother. At the very moment he also finds the one he has so persistently sought; he now recognizes himself as the one who bears the curse that is laid upon the city. In this shattering moment of self-recognition Oedipus is compelled to recognize in himself another, an otherness of identity, a strange and estranging revelation that forever alters who he is. The self-image reflected in tragic drama is that of a deinos, “an incomprehensible and baffling monster, both an agent and one acted upon, guilty and innocent, lucid and blind, [who] ... can dominate the whole of nature yet who is incapable of governing himself.”

What we learn from the reversals and discoveries of tragedy is that, without warning, things can convert into their opposite and that, like Oedipus, we too are finally enigmatic to ourselves. Here lies the pathos of tragedy that involves the suffered knowledge of what cannot be resolved, but only endured. “It is the knowledge that praxis is riddled with ambiguities and contradictions that are opaque, and yet ... powerfully disruptive. It is also the knowledge that one cannot lift oneself out of this torn condition.”

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54 Gadamer, *RB*, p. 100; *KA*, p. 32. Gadamer reasserts the mythico-religious background of tragedy that Aristotle neglects. Insofar as the *Poetics* insists on the intelligibility conferred by the plot constructed by the poet, the role of the gods and fate are accordingly diminished. Halliwell even notes that Aristotle “deliberately reinterprets the possibilities of tragic drama so as to make the religious ideas of myth marginal to its purpose”. (Halliwell, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, p. 12.) Gadamer, however, affirms the import of fate, even arguing that the self-recognition afforded by tragedy “was made possible and supported by the whole world of the Greek religious tradition ...” (Gadamer, *RB*, p. 100; *KA*, p. 32.)

55 Gadamer, *RB*, p. 100; *KA*, pp. 84–5.


“enigma of human existence”—namely, “we know and yet do not know ourselves in the struggle between nature and spirit, animality and divinity, a dissension that is yet inseparably united in human life.”

V

According to Gadamer’s analysis, tragedy and the tragic are exemplary of aesthetic being. Hence he finds it necessary to transcend the abstractions of aesthetic consciousness and the reduction of aesthetic being they entail. Above all, he is concerned to retrieve the claim to truth to which the experience of art attests. In this effort, I have argued, the tragic work of art plays a critical role. I conclude by showing that his appropriation of Aristotle’s theory of tragedy enables Gadamer to develop his understanding of the artwork as an ontological event which includes the spectator. “My thesis,” he writes, “is that the being of art cannot be defined as an object of an aesthetic consciousness because ... the aesthetic attitude is more than it knows of itself. It is part of the event of being that occurs in presentation and belongs essentially to the play [of art] as play.”

As a consequence, the mimetic presentation that takes place in the tragic drama cannot be separated from its performance because it is only in its being played that the self-presentation of the work takes place. “The playing of the drama,” he says, “ask[s] to be understood ... as the coming-into-existence of the work itself.”

Here the appropriation of Aristotle’s theory of tragedy opens onto a hermeneutic ontology of the work of art where the work is conceived as a presentation in which an event of being takes place that is at the same time an event of truth.

First, the work of art has the mode of being of an event. For Gadamer this means that the play only exists in being played, that the work of art only “is” in its performance. This is the import of his terse claim: “All art lies in its enactment (Vollzug).”

This is most evident with the so-called “performing arts” such as tragic drama where the work is truly “there” only in and through its performance. Playing their roles in the tragedy, the actors are taken up into the presentation of the play, performing the work so that “it comes out.” But the play itself is also a meaningful structure that is intended for an audience in whom it achieves its genuine significance. Hence “the play itself is the whole, comprising players and spectators.” In fact, Gadamer continues, “it is experienced properly by, and presents itself (as it is ‘meant’) to, the one who is not acting in the play but watching it.”

In this respect the spectator is no mere observer of what occurs, but a genuine participant, that is, “one who ... literally ‘takes part.’”

Here the distinction between performer and spectator is essentially overcome. Indeed, “the genuine reception and experience of the work of art can only exist for one who ‘plays along,’ that is, one who performs in

58 Gadamer, RB, p. 76; KA, p. 325.
59 Gadamer, TM, p. 115; WM, p. 121. Gadamer’s emphasis.
60 Gadamer, TM, p. 116; WM, p. 122.
63 Gadamer, RB, p. 24; KA, p. 115.
an active way himself.” Participating in its presentation, the spectator thus belongs to the being of the work of art.

Second, through the work of art a presentation occurs. The performance of the play, enacted through the participation of the spectator, accomplishes the self-presentation of the work. For Gadamer, this is the “original” meaning of mimesis that he retrieves from Aristotle’s Poetics. Mimesis now names the event of presentation by which something comes to presence in the work such that it is presented in its true being. This is a far cry from the idea of imitation as the likeness of a copy to its original. Indeed, “the presentation of essence, far from being mere imitation, is necessarily revelatory.”64 And yet this is not just true of tragedy for “in every work we encounter something like mimesis …” Hence Gadamer believes “tradition is justified in saying that ‘art is always mimesis,’ that is, it brings something to presentation (sie bringt etwas zur Darstellung).”65 As a “bringing forth” we have seen that such presentation involves the participation of the spectator. In fact, mimesis contains within itself “an essential relation to everyone for whom the presentation exists.”66 Such reference to the spectator is clearly implied where he states that “the meaning of the word ‘mimesis’ consists simply in letting something be there …”67 The spectator is held co-responsible for the coming to presence that characterizes the work of art. Gadamer thus appropriates the concept of mimesis to the event of being that takes place in the self-presentation of the artwork.

Third, the being of the artwork includes its effect on the spectator. Art addresses us; it is an spruchsvoll. In other words, the work speaks to us (uns anspricht) by making a determinate claim (bestimmter Anspruch). To participate genuinely in the work of art is to submit oneself to its claim. But the claim does not just demand that we understand ‘what’ is presented, but that we understand ourselves in light of that ‘what.’ In the case of tragedy, the spectator’s engagement with the work is exhibited by the mimetic identification effected through the tragic emotion evoked by the work. Indeed, the moment of self-recognition is marked by the katharsis of these emotions. For Gadamer, however, this is true of all art. By compelling us to confront ourselves, art transforms us. The experience of art is a genuine experience that does not leave one unchanged. In the experience of tragedy we are torn outside of ourselves by the sheer force of the tragic events and yet are nonetheless returned to ourselves. Stripped bare of ethical and cognitive resources we find ourselves exposed before the ruthlessness of fate. This is the claim that tragedy makes upon us. But every genuine experience of art is such that I suddenly find myself defined by the work’s claim “as if it mirrored a part of myself that I may hardly know how to recognize but which I cannot renounce.”68 The self-encounter—“This is you”—is

64 Gadamer, TM, p. 114; WM, p. 120.
65 Gadamer, RB, p. 36; KA, p. 126. Translation altered.
66 Gadamer, TM, p. 114; WM, p. 120.
67 Gadamer, RB, p. 119; KA, p. 83.
followed by the challenge—"You must change your life." This claim demands more than a change in perspective; it demands a veritable self-transformation. The work’s claim to truth thus calls for a transformation that, at its most profound depth, is both a renewal and retrieval of oneself.

In this essay I have argued that Gadamer appeals to tragedy and the tragic in his effort to transcend the aesthetic and affirm art’s claim to truth. Bearing witness to the truth that takes place in the experience of art, tragedy exposes the abstractions of aesthetic consciousness which falsify that experience. Gadamer’s retrieval of the question of truth focuses on the Poetics because he finds there a theory of tragedy and the tragic that confirms mimesis as the presentation of being that occurs in the experience of art. Aristotle’s definition of tragedy also provides confirmation of its effect on those who, witnessing the tragic events, experience a transforming katharsis. Even more, by its inclusion of the spectator, that definition offers Gadamer the opening by which he appropriates the Aristotelian theory of tragedy and the tragic to a hermeneutic ontology of the work of art. Hence tragedy is exemplary for Gadamer because it testifies to the being of the work of art as event of presentation that, enacted by the spectator, makes a claim to truth that is at once mimetic and cathartic, revelatory and transformative.

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69 Gadamer, RB, pp. 151, 35; KA, pp. 153, 125.