Taylor begins this book by challenging the oppositions meant to make the conversation between tragedy and theology impossible. Instead, and writing in the tradition of thinkers including Schneider, Niebuhr, Balthasar, MacKinnon and Rowan Williams, he opts for the more productive inquiry of how tragedy and theology inform, enlighten and oppose one another. Balthasar, for instance, determined that ‘the decisive dialogue between antiquity and Christianity lay not so much in the centuries-old exchange between Plato and patristic-scholastic theology as in that between the Greek tragedians and the Christian saints about the meaning of human existence’. The value of Taylor’s study lies in the significant expansion of this dialogue past the prioritisation of Greek antiquity, and arguing (like Williams) that, as an exercise, exploring the tragic alongside the theological is to undertake a methodology fundamental to human thinking and experience. Further, it is to locate Christian hope within the liminal space between despair and triumphalism – indeed, theology and tragedy in conversation preserve such a space while denying the worst tendencies of each.

The result is a clear and refreshing study which guides its reader through the mazes of both ‘tragedy’ and ‘theology’ as these genres have appeared and intersected across the history of literature and drama, and through the ethical paradoxes and the conceptions of the divine that they often lean upon. The strength of the work here is Taylor’s recognition that ‘tragedy, like evil and suffering, is inherently messy, ever resistant to systematic explanations’ (9), and Taylor similarly debunks the idea that the Christian faith embodies some singular understanding of ethical agency in relation to fate, divine sovereignty and the inexorability of suffering within the human condition. The work is admirable for being able to maintain these multiple lines of inquiry with its command of the breadth of thinkers, authors, dramatists and theologians across history, cultures and traditions of interpretation. Alongside such breadth, though, there is also an intellectual humility which prefers observation over determination, so that even with Thomas Hardy (Taylor’s specialty) we read that ‘we simply don’t know what to do with him’ (8).
Taylor’s thesis is that theology can counter-balance its tendencies towards triumphalism by recognising the elements of tragedy incumbent within it, both within Old Testament scripture as much as the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. Similarly, tragedy, as the aesthetic exploration of contingency, the futility of human agency and the confusing economy of loss and gain often given to human judgement, can tend towards abject nihilism without otherwise referring to transcendence, as it often does: not as some false hope or convenient deus ex machina but as the admission of human limitation which, in turn, lands us at the threshold of the possibility of the divine grace.

A point on which I must correct Taylor, however, is his treatment of Nietzsche. The errors begin with Taylor proposing that ‘Nietzsche’s Apollo suggests a rational exploration of tragedy’ (36). However, for Nietzsche, rationality (in the form of Socratism) was opposed to both the Apollonian and Dionysian. To be sure, Apollo represents clarity, light, healing and calm – and in this sense can be thought of as ‘coherence’. However, far from the ‘rational’, Nietzsche’s Apollo personifies the lie of existence: the ‘healing balm of blissful deception’, ‘the intended effect of which is to relieve us of the pressing, excessive burden of the Dionysiac’. The only connection between the rationality of Socratism and the Apollonian is Nietzsche’s early idea that rational discourse, by necessity, comprises an impoverished deployment of aesthetics which will only be realised with the collapse of optimism.

I also question the ease with which Taylor dismisses Nietzsche as a whole – within the space of a paragraph he determines his philosophy of tragedy to be ‘a powerful idea, but like all such theories it falls apart’ (49). However, ‘tragedy’ takes on an unusual and evolving form throughout Nietzsche’s corpus. On the one hand, it can seem like a tightening of the term into something like ‘the contradictions of existence which yield suffering’, but the truth is that its significance and usage for Nietzsche is astonishingly broad: it is his basis for defining the possibilities for human flourishing as much as the despair inherent in existence. Confusingly, Taylor later writes that ‘Nietzsche declared himself anti-Christ, and his work has remained richly useful for Christian theologians’ (101), however does not elaborate on what uses these are and what he makes of them. Accordingly, he joins Schneider, Niebuhr and Williams in declining a more sustained exploration of the most prominent of tragic philosophers.

As much as levelling this as a criticism to Taylor’s book, it is more profitably taken as an invitation to further research, and an indication of the richness and complexity of Taylor’s study. Scholars will find Christ the Tragedy of God an enlightening contribution to this field, presenting a novel thesis which aims to enact the very methodology it illuminates. So while...
Taylor admits at the outset that his study can have no determinative end, what he does reveal is that tragedy and theology, to their mutual benefit, can be symbiotically informative without collapsing into one another. Indeed, this symbiosis is at the heart of Taylor’s Christology: his emphasis that Christ enters into the sphere of tragedy in all its contingency, loss, guilt and sacrifice as the means of allowing humanity to enter into the hope of God. In other words, we can accept that human experience is marked by the tragic, and that there is no Pythagorean ‘music of the spheres’ by which painful decisions, actions and consequences are ordered. However, this need not discount the notion of Christian hope: conceiving, as Balthasar wrote, that ‘all the waves of the ocean [are] an as-yet unordered song of coming eternity’.

The University of Melbourne

Paul Raimond Daniels

---

1 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 69 (§14), 75 (§15).
Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:
Daniels, PR

Title:
Christ the Tragedy of God: A Theological Exploration of Tragedy

Date:
2020-07-01

Citation:

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/276890