

Grassi's Tragic Humanism?

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Hall is right about Grassi's value for constructive thought. Grassi's account of the "theater of the world" and the "tragedy of existence" corroborates this, since these concepts reveal that humanism for Grassi always entails that human beings must accept the transience, pain, death, desperation, futility, and vanity of their existence. This means for Grassi that human beings, however constructive, imaginative, and ingenious their responses to the call of being may be, passionately live and work and love under the specter and in the grips of tragedy.

The theater provides Plato with a model illustrating that the world confronts human beings in the same way as a theatrical work performed on stage confronts the spectators. But Plato (who here represents "traditional philosophy") is limited for Grassi because he attempts to account for the origin of the world through a process of rational-causal thinking that begins with individual beings and deduces the need for a demiurge who produces transient beings from non-being and orders their processes of becoming in accordance with an eternal paradigm. When this explanation of the world's origin is viewed in terms of the metaphor of the theater, the demiurge is the divine author of a theatrical work performed on the stage of the world for the human beings who are its spectators. Grassi argues that this type of rational-causal thinking fails because it merely interprets beings in terms of other beings, and this at best will only account for the reason why beings follow after other beings in succession. What it overlooks is the ontological difference between beings and being as such, and what it therefore misses is the appeal of being as the very force that founds beings.

Grassi nonetheless seeks to show that the metaphor of the theater of the world offers a clue for formulating his own (very Heideggerian) account of the origin of the world. The world is born when the power of being or the "abyss" (*ab-Grund*) in its

historical unfolding imposes its appeal upon human beings by virtue of the fact that they essentially are the clearing in which beings are objectively manifest in terms of the historically-bound "codes" of sensation, language, and action. Put in terms of the theater-model, the abyss compulsorily opens itself up as the "originary theater" of human existence, and the curtain is thereby raised on a stage where individual beings objectively appear. The theater-model allows Grassi to emphasize that action or *praxis* is one of the history-bound modes in terms of which beings appear and by which the abyss imposes its summons. It is through the creative and destructive actions of human beings in history that worlds emerge and beings manifest themselves objectively. Or, to follow the theater-model, beings appear on the stage where there plays out the human drama, in which humans participate as both actors and spectators. "We ourselves," Grassi writes, "are drawn onto the stage of the theater of the world by the power of the *praxis* of life" (*The Primordial Metaphor*, trans. Laura Pietropaolo and Manuela Scari [Binghamton, New York: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies State University of New York, 1994], 42-46).

It is interesting that Grassi writes mostly of tragedy as the type of drama performed in the originary theater. One reason is that Grassi argues that the distinction between beings and being emerges unexpectedly in Aristotle's definitions of tragedy in the *Poetics*. Grassi interprets *mimesis* as representation through rhythmic language (music) realized in movements of the body (dance). And he interprets *mythos* as the plot-principle that governs all other elements, including characters, diction, thought, spectacle, as well as the unfolding of cause and effect. On Grassi's reading both *mimesis* and *mythos* serve as originary modes or governing codes in terms of which individual beings become objectively intelligible. As part of the process of manifestation they both thereby speak to the manner in which being as such imposes its appeal upon human beings. The theater-model as Grassi develops it, when stated completely, runs along these lines: the abyss that is the power of being compels a breach that is the theater of human existence, wherein individual beings appear objectively on stage and are intelligible in terms of the mimetic and mythic tragic dramatic action by and into which we ourselves are drawn forth as both actors and spectators (*Primordial Metaphor*, 46-54).

But Grassi's focus on tragedy has a much more negative dimension and goes far beyond merely gesturing toward the fact that *mimesis* and *mythos* are elements of Aristotle's definition of tragedy. It is the transience of human being above all that colors Grassi's work with a hue of sadness and even at times lament. After all, human beings are suspended over the power of the abyss that opens them up as the clearing, yet they are a mere "lightning flash," on both sides of which stands the menacing, terrifying darkness of destruction into which death demands that they vanish. That the power of being unfolds in historically-bound becoming entails an ever-changing and everlasting succession of construction and destruction, which is why Grassi is drawn to the tragedy of Prometheus and the paradigmatic significance of the eagle that devours his liver by day, only so that the liver might regenerate by night. It is no wonder that this radical recognition of the absolute transience of the human clearing brings with it for Grassi a certain dread sense of pain and vanity, and this is certainly the clue for understanding the dedication of *Primordial Metaphor*, in which Grassi confesses to write "in desperation and with the awareness that all is futile." Stated in terms of the theater-metaphor, the human drama becomes an unrelentingly negative tragedy of existence: "As soon as on the stage of existence the most terrible passions have been played through to their ultimate limit, the actors fold limply on themselves like worn out clothes. The set is struck, the theater is empty. All recedes into silence. The word without passion runs dry. Is this our destiny? To walk forever on an endless path?" (*Primordial Metaphor*, 38-41).

Grassi's tragic sensibility casts new light on his humanism. Yes, humans answer the imposing summons of being in imagination, ingenuity, labor, and community. Yes, humans respond to the appeal of the integrity of life to their conscience. But this exacts a heroic or (more often than not) reluctant Yes to the tragedy of their existence. And with this there emerges, we shall say, the possibility of a tragic humanism. It is Hall who has pointed the way to this formulation.

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