Three Versions of Life: the pastoral, tragic and melodramatic

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Pastoral, tragedy and melodrama are three literary forms which reflect three distinct interpretations of human life. This essay examines what these literary forms have to tell us about human experience.

1 *The (American) Pastoral Version of Experience*

In his article 'American Pastoral' (*Thought* 27/102, 1952, pp. 365—380), John P. Sisk explains how a particular literary form reflects a basic human aspiration and its liabilities. Sisk's examination of the relationship between literature and life in American pastoral is relevant to the human problematic reflected in both the tragic and melodramatic interpretations of human experience. An overview of Sisk's study of American pastoral allows insights to emerge about the interrelationship of these three versions of human experience.

Pastoral poetry idealized shepherds and shepherdesses in idealized rustic surroundings. The pastoral form is artificial and unnatural. However, if we turn from the subject matter conventionally associated with pastoral to the attitude that is at work in this subject matter, we discover that the essential thing in pastoral, according to Sisk, is a certain critical vision of simplicity. It is basically critical because it is an argument. Its argument is that a certain simple state of affairs is more desirable than a certain complex state of affairs. To state its case effectively, it must use the tools of argument, among them abstraction and hyperbole. Abstracting from life only what will not hurt its cause, it too often exaggerates unscrupulously in the interest of the cause. Ironically, then, in the very act of opposing truth to falsehood what truth the pastoralizer possesses is distorted into falsehood. The only kind of pastoral hero the creator of pastoral is safe with is a sentimentalized abstraction (e.g. the artificial cowboy) who represents no real threat to him and in whom he can pleasantly pretend to believe. Thus the pastoral hero is a safe hero only when he is ridiculously mythified and in general lied about. Then, ironically again, the very act which pretends to be revealing hypocrisy is itself hypocritical.

The pastoral hero is a person in whom innocence, simplicity and natural insight combine in a remarkable degree. He is clear-visioned,

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1987.tb01273.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

uncomplicated, sure of his aim, close to and in rapport with nature. To the artificial and man-made he opposes and champions the nature-made or its symbolic equivalent. He lives where the air is pure, close to the great throbbing heart of things. His intercourse with his primal source of power and wisdom is intuitive and mystic rather than discursive and rational. Recalling Rousseau's Noble Savage, he is a free being who draws directly from nature virtues that raise doubts as to the value of civilization. He is, in short, the sort of person that Americans have for generations idealized and flattered themselves that they are, or very nearly are.

American history is markedly pastoral: there is always the wilderness, the prairie, the frontier, the wide open spaces. There is always the awareness of an older, debilitated, hopelessly artificial and complex civilization, at once watching with awe and being dramatically criticized and found wanting. And when Europe is too distant to offer the opposition needed for complete pastoral, there is the Europeanized Atlantic seaboard, and after that big-city life wherever it may be. American beginnings are endlessly recalled in pastoral stories of a young, hearty, clean-blooded, freedom-seeking, wilderness-encircled band finding a physical and spiritual vigour in its primitive environment and asserting itself boldly and successfully against an effete, oversophisticated fatherland.

The pastoral pattern is established early and grooved deeply. It provides a way of conceiving of oneself dramatically, even mythically, in an environment often malign. It provides a way of cheering oneself up, of compensating for inferiority feelings—for the complex, the effete and sophisticated continue to inspire the worshipper of the pastoral hero with misgivings. It provides that sense of personal identification with forces beyond the transcient and particular and personal, so necessary if one is to go effectively about one's business. In short, it makes poetry (often dangerous) out of the crude materials of living.

Pastoral proper is the offspring of civilization; for the man contending with the wilderness is too busy to adopt a dramatic or pastoral attitude toward himself. The pastoralizer must have leisure and well-being to criticize and idealize. He must have time to realize his dissatisfaction with his nonpastoral condition. The pastoral temper begins to flower in Emerson, Thoreau and the Transcendentalists, who oppose nature and simplicity to the sterilizing artificialities of industrial civilization. They walk out into the fields on Sunday instead of going to church; they get through directly and intuitively to the true and the real, eschewing the pedestrian intermediaries (an important element in all romantic and most American pastoral); they leave the soul-frustrating, custom-blinded conventions of organized society to find in strange but vital country new power and new insights, which they turn back critically

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1987.tb01273.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

upon society.

The American pastoral impulse expresses itself proteanly in many forms. There is, for instance, the pastoral hero as Indian scout, as trail-blazer, as river-boat captain, as cowboy, as Texas Ranger, as backwoodsman. Here it is not the fact of such occupations but a certain idea about them that counts. Again, the pastoral hero becomes the farmer, the dweller in small villages, the cracker-barrel philosopher, the homespun Socrates: a Scattergood Bains, a Will Rogers, a Davy Crockett. He embodies the belief that true wisdom can come (or can *only* come) by way of nature rather than nurture; that civilization, particularly big-city civilization, sophisticates and shallows the human soul whereas plain country living simplifies and deepens it. Moving closer to our time, there is the pastoral hero as pilot, as child, as successful boob, as common man, as youth, as social misfit, even as gangster. Again, it is the idea, not the fact, of such figures that expresses the pastoral impulse. The adolescent (Huckleberry Finn, Orphan Annie) can be looked to for clear-eyed, infallible evaluation—even oracular utterance (man-made civilization has not yet contaminated the pristine innocence of his soul). Youth and beauty can be idealized and mythified, particularly in a materialistic culture terrorized by the fact of mutability.

The successful boob is a version of the pastoral hero that has done well in films: Buster Keaton, Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, Danny Kaye, Martin and Lewis, Bob Hope have exploited this role for all it is worth. In a comic context the boob represents again the triumph of nature over nurture. He objectivizes the common man's desire to succeed without striving and his need to feel that there is in him *naturally* some precious element that guarantees success without striving. In a cluster of pastoral heroes outside the law—desperadoes, racketeers, gunmen and philosophic prostitutes—there is the appeal of a direct, even 'pure', revolt against organized, complicated, hypocritical, tyrannical civilization (but these may best be called the heroes of crypto-pastoral, since it is difficult to mythify or idealize them too overtly).

For all its surface concern with simplicity, pastoral is really a complex affair whose critical vision of simplicity may be rooted in enlightenment ideas, in nineteenth-century romanticism and humanitarianism, in fascism, in American individualism, or in any combination of these or other ingredients. All the same, behind the pastoral urge there is, no doubt, a genuine need of a state of complete simplicity: the need to feel whole, justified, in spiritual rapport with the elemental forces of the universe. It manifests whatever it was that drove Descartes to reduce reality to the clear and simple idea, or whatever it is that drives anyone to seek for the master idea or principle that will integrate and explain the bewildering complexity of life.

Pastoral as expression of the appetite for simplicity is of course

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healthy enough. However, a culture too pressingly in need of pastoral to be very discriminatory or disciplined in its search for it has something wrong with it. The same holds for a culture too slothfully in love with complexity, artificiality and triviality to want anything more from pastoral than a comfortable, narcotic daydream. Current American pastoral is generally soft-headed fantasy, sentimentality, innocuous satire, and adolescent mythification of the past. It has little regard for genuine simplicity and innocence and wants only to toy with the idea of them for the thrill of it. The real problem is that the modern American pastoralizes himself too readily, believing himself to be firmly in possession of the critical vision of simplicity. The result is the ease with which he accepts oversimplified accounts of his own past and the certainty with which he assesses the complexity and sophistication of the world he lives in, particularly those parts of it he does not immediately live in.

Most American pastoral presumes that simplicity is easily attained; that it is an American heritage, given rather than earned. This kind of pastoral has little regard for the simplicity that really matters: that which is earned by mastering complexity. Much American pastoral is an escape from complexity, an implicit admission that the conditions of modern life baffle our attempt to find pattern and meaning. Because the vision of simplicity that is retreated to is not really believed in either, there is the implicit admission that pattern and meaning are possible only in fantasy or have, at best, personal rather than general validity. Pastoral can, therefore, be founded on despair. The pastoralizer can confront the despair and pastoralize on it, after the fashion of Hemingway or Henry Miller. Both are stoically aware of themselves as embattled heroically with enveloping chaos.

It is dangerous to turn despairingly away from complexity to seek temporary comfort in naive and sentimental fantasies of simplicity. Complexity must be faced and contended with: simplicity must be earned in it. It is dangerous to assume that complexity is all illusion, that it can be overcome by turning away from it, or that by sheer force of will simplicity can be imposed on it. Complexity makes easy victims of those who refuse in this way to contend with it.

Hemingway, for example, as pastoral writer of *Across the River and into the Trees,* can only pastoralize effectively when he has abstracted from life much that cannot be abstracted without seriously distorting it. Correspondingly, the anti-pastoral world of convention his hero objects to is itself a distortion, created to display to best advantage the virtue and simplicity of that mainly anti-rational hero whose insight and power stem from his proximity to the throbbing heart of things: Hemingway's nature, found only in the immediate, physical, existential fact of experience. Hemingway's pastoral hero lives life close to the bone,

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rejecting the inadequacies of a life cluttered up with cerebration and critical idealism and spirituality. This kind of pastoral simplicity is hardly distinguishable from the nihilism which rejects interpretative formulations of experience that assume any objective or real ground of truth.

2 *The Tragic Version of Experience*

We not only write tragedy and melodrama but also, in quite nonliterary contexts, view human experience tragically or melodramatically.

Tragedy is the name not only of a literary form but of an aspect of human life. When we speak of 'the tragic sense', we affirm an attribute not only of a writer and what he writes, but of a human being who has a certain way of contemplating experience. Our association between a kind of experience in life and a comparable experience in the imagined life of drama is not arbitrary. The same interpretative vision is operative in both.

Tragedy is a specific form of experience that needs to be differentiated from all other catastrophic disturbances of human life. Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero enables differentiation. The two main terms in his account of the hero are that he is a good man and that he gets into trouble through an error or shortcoming, for which the standard term is 'the tragic flaw'. The fundamental goodness of the person is jeopardized by an element of inconsistency within his or her character—the potentially self-destructive element that is also, of course, sometimes discernable in social groups: families, communities, nations. Goodness and inconsistency (flawedness) imply conflicting incentives, conflicting needs and desires. There are pulls and counterpulls within the personality pulling it apart. The integrity (integration or wholeness) of the personality is threatened by 'the tragic flaw' or inconsistency, the disintegrating or dividing element. (The New Testament confronts this problem in terms of the self-destructive futility of trying to serve two masters.) The thinking of the tragic hero is a polyphony, where several thoughts are working simultaneously, one of which is the bearer of the leading voice. The other thoughts represent the medium and low voices, which are not always in harmony with the leading voice but discordant. For his own inner peace the tragic hero must make up his mind and decide in favour of this or that voice.

Tragedy connotes the depth of dividedness or inconsistency within human nature, the belief that we enclose within ourselves certain antinomies or a war of instincts, impulses and incentives. Antigone, for example, cannot be true to family duty and love without contravening civil law; and Creon cannot maintain civil order without punitive decrees that violate the human sense of justice. Hamlet and Orestes cannot vindicate their fathers, the victims of evil deeds, without themselves

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1987.tb01273.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

committing evil deeds. The tragic hero is pressed to decision by the divisions, pulls and counterpulls, in life and in himself. There are alternatives competing for the hero's allegiance, and he must select one or the other. Ignorance of alternatives and inability to make decisions cannot produce tragic stature. A degree of mature adulthood is the prerequisite for such stature.

In the tragic view of human experience man is seen in his strength and in his weakness; he experiences defeat in victory or victory in defeat; his goodness is intermingled with the power and inclination to do evil; his will is tempered in the suffering that comes with new knowledge and maturity. With its inclusive vision of good and evil, tragedy never sees man's excellence divorced from his inclination to love the wrong, nor does it see the evil that he does divorced from his capacity for spiritual recovery.

The tragic view does not treat good and evil as independent wholes or substitute the part for the whole in its complexity. It avoids the reductionism or oversimplification of pastoral. It does not incline toward monopathic attitudes: toward a triumphalism of unqualified hopefulness, a naive optimism that good is chosen without anguish and integrity maintained without precariousness; nor, on the other extreme, toward the despair of our surviving against the villainy of others or of ourselves.

In tragedy the sense of ruin coexists with other elements: impulses and options are dual or multifold and conflicting in their claims to our allegiance. The spectacle of the aged Lear, for example, as victim of madness and the storm cannot inspire a monopathic pity, for we do not forget that, under the dominion of the dark side of his character, he has created the storm himself. Profound pity for Lear as victim is qualified by our acknowledgement of the paradoxical presence of justice and irony. We experience a concomitant sense of compassion and justice in our recognition of the tragic hero's complexity. (The New Testament affirmations that God alone is good and that Jesus Christ is like us in all but sin express Christian faith in the existence of an absolute divine and human goodness, without limitation, without division or 'tragic flaw', a goodness that is normative of all human goodness.)

In tragedy it is assumed that we live simultaneously in two different worlds, the world of desire and the world of limits. There is necessarily a tension between our experience in each of these two worlds which, insofar as we confront it, becomes more explicit as life goes by. We live in the tension of these interacting worlds. Our action is sustained by desire of some kind, by the urge to attain something thought of as good, whatever it may be. Desire pushes against limits in the search for something better. To intervene actively in changing ourselves or our situation we must hold some ideals which differ from our present reality

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or from our actual situation, so that between the ideal and the reality there prevails a certain tension. Tragedy assumes that human desire can be only partially fulfilled in this life; there always remains a residue of non-fulfilment, of difficulty. Our decision for something better means our imposing limits on ourselves; so desire must come to term with limits. The world of desire is sustained in the world of limits when our plans and ideals succeed in gaining concrete results within that world; otherwise they remain dreams, empty, without substance. In the tragic version of experience life is lived in an area where limits are experienced neither as totally harmonious nor as totally violent; yet limits (e.g. the tragic flaw) are never absent, and the threat of painful experience is never far distant. All deep commitment entails the possibility of experiencing the tragic; for we can fail persons or causes or things about which we care.

In tragedy our liabilities can overtake us, even ruinously. When they do, we are not simply weak, ignorant, cynical or corrupt because we do not deceive ourselves about our actions. We know our misdeeds and irresponsibility. Tragedy is not so much the truth realized too late, but the way of coming to our senses. We come to understand that we have erred terribly, but we can seek a mode of recovery. In this sense we may say it is our good fortune that tragedy catches up with us; for this can save us from irreparable disaster. Tragedy is the idiom of an imperfect humanity that remains capable of redemption. Although failure is possible, it is not mistaken for the final blow, the road to nothing. Tragedy affirms the hope for self-transcendence (e.g. Peter's repentence after his betrayal of Christ). It deals with our self-destructive temptation to become our own little gods, to reject limiting moral imperatives, to transgress the boundaries of responsible decision and action—persons who refuse to accept these limits are the constant theme of classical tragedy: Oedipus, Macbeth, Dr. Faustus, Phèdre. All know what these limits are, and all of them in the exuberance of passion violate them. Their tragic experience of wrong choices and their consequences results in a humbling self-knowledge. In this respect, the tragic is not disastrous and tragedy is not the dramatic embodiment of despair. There is no tragedy without the affirmation of human dignity and value. Tragic suffering is the matrix for coming to a recognition of our true dignity, one which is always within limits. There is a process within the tragic form of human experience which begins with a *purpose* (to do something about the Theban plague; vindicate the killing of the former king), that moves through *passion* (action, conflict, suffering) and then is followed by *perception* (the wisdom begotten of pursuing the purpose passionately).

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3 *The Melodramatic Version of Experience*

In tragedy, conflict is inner; in melodrama, it is outer. Melodrama dichotomizes human life with division between the good and the evil, the weak and the strong, victors and victims, the human and the inhuman. Melodrama is a way of interpreting human life as a kind of war between angels and devils: a demonology. In melodrama, one attacks or is attacked. Its heroes and villains do not experience inner tensions or struggles. Its heroes are incapable of doing wrong; its villains are incapable of doing good. Heroes attack or are attacked because they are good. Villains attack or are attacked because they are evil. Both heroes and villains enjoy a melodramatic oneness, a singleness of passion or conviction that expresses itself in conflict with whatever stands in its way. The heroes of melodrama are pitted against a force outside of themselves: a specific enemy, a hostile group, a social movement.

The experience of melodrama is monopathic. There is a oneness of feeling in persons who are always undivided, unperplexed by alternatives, untorn by divergent impulses. All their strength or weakness faces in one direction. The competitors or crusaders or aggressors or defenders in melodrama do not experience the mixed feelings of their counterparts in tragedy, which is polypathic. In melodrama we are simply triumphant, hopeless, challenging, defensive, joyful, bitter, purposeful or victimized. The monopathic melodramatic experience is exhilarating, sensational, and thrilling with little regard for convincing motivation. Melodrama constantly appeals to the emotions. It aims at keeping us thrilled by the awakening, no matter how, of intense feelings of pity, or horror or joy, whereas the complex motivation of tragedy evokes mixed feelings—it is as troubling and burdensome as gaining true self-knowledge must be.

In melodrama we are seen in our strength or in our weakness; in tragedy, both in our strength and in our weakness. In melodrama we are victorious or we are defeated; in tragedy we experience defeat in victory or victory in defeat. In melodrama we are good or evil; in tragedy our goodness coexists with our inclination to evil. In melodrama our will is broken or it conquers; in tragedy it is tempered in the suffering that accompanies personal maturation in the acquisition of new wisdom. Melodrama, in separating good and evil and in treating them as independent wholes, tends toward a belief that human transformation for better or for worse is impossible. Melodrama is the idiom of presumption and despair, of self-righteousness and futility. The Christian message of salvation is meaningless in the melodramatic world where the good (heroes) have no need of it and the bad (villains) are beyond it. Reconciliation and forgiveness have no place in the melodramatic version of the human condition. The spirit of melodrama thrives where rationality is decried and violence is extolled. Revenge and

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war are basic forms of melodramatic action. As long as we can discern evil in other individuals or groups or institutions, we will have the grounds for melodramatic action both in life and on the stage. Only when we are troubled by the evil that originates within ourselves or our own groups or institutions will we have grounds for tragic action.

Some Theological Reflections

Pastoral, tragedy and melodrama reflect our longing for the simplicity and harmony and peace that result from our mastery of both internal and external conflicts. Our pastoral longings are challenged by both our internal inconsistencies and our external conflicts. Our longings are felt at every level: intrapersonal, interpersonal, social, national and international. The liabilities that we experience in our attempts to satisfy our longings and resolve our conflicts must be critically examined both in real life and its expression in literature and drama.

Our literary forms express our ways of interpreting our experience. They imply that we have achieved the maturity to appropriate our life stories; for this is impossible without forms or modes for interpreting them. Wherever human life stories are being effectively communicated, some literary form or other is, at least implicitly, operative. The gospel, for example, is the literary form that the evangelists employed to tell the story of Jesus. The literary form no less than the content of the gospels reflects the cognitive and affective life of the evangelist at every level. The gospel as literature reflects life and serves as a matrix for theological reflection. Our biblical narratives, no less than our living tradition—our history—as the people of God, have a form and content that constitute the foundational matrix for our theological reflection and self-understanding at every level. Our lives of faith and love are expressed in the form and content of both our narratives and tradition.

Our desire for peace has pastoral, tragic and melodramatic dimensions. Let us clarify this statement. Peace is a question of personal interiority, arising from a right relationship with God. It is also the time when all tears will be wiped away, the time of the eternal banquet in justice and righteousness. Our eschatological vision of peace is that of a reality to be brought about in God's time, by God's action in the completion of human history. Our vision is also a horizon against which we measure the brokenness of the present, and perhaps bring to that brokenness a measure of healing. Peace is also the tranquillity of order in freedom, charity, justice, and truth—a this-worldly possibility whose realization is not an option, but a moral imperative. Catholic incarnational humanism expresses the pastoral longing for peace, but sees human beings as they are: fallen and weak, but still the images of God in history. It has the tragic awareness that the demons within us make conflict inevitable; still, conflict need not lead to mass violence if a

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rightly ordered peace of political community has been established. The better angels of our nature create political communities where conflict can be resolved through law and governance. There is no ineluctable slippery slope from conflict to the melodrama of war. But peace does not simply happen; it must be achieved. The pastoral aspiration is realized by active, committed and intelligent peacemakers. Christ's way of the cross is that of the Peacemaker both reconciling and integrating all humankind under the sovereignty of God's love and wisdom. The Good Shepherd is the Pastoral Hero giving his life that all humankind might live in the freedom, charity, justice and truth of his peace. He is effectively leading or governing his people when the Church is actively at the service of peace as a religious community with a distinctive view of the human prospect.

The Church most powerfully addresses the possibilities of the human condition when its anthropology is intimately linked to its Christology. Christ is not only a revelation of God and his saving will for all humankind through the Church, but also a revelation of the human person, of what that person was intended to be at creation and is by reason of the Incarnation of the Son of God and by reason of the Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension. The Redeemer of the world is the Pastoral Hero in whom the goodness of creation (Gn 1, *passim*) is revealed in a new and more wonderful way. That goodness has its sources in Wisdom and Love. Through sin that creation 'was subjected to futility' (Rm 8:20); in Christ, it recovers its original link with the divine Wisdom and Love. The Redeemer reconciles and reintegrates the world in the peace and communion that he enjoys with his Father and all humankind. He is, in fact, the communion (peace) that he gives. He is the Pastoral Hero who overcomes our tragic condition of inner division (inconsistency) and our melodramatic condition of external conflicts and war by sharing the peace of his triune communion for the transforming integration of all human life.

Biblical eschatological banquet symbolism expresses the pastoral longing of the community of faith for a peace that God alone can give at every level of human life to overcome both the tragic and melodramatic evils besetting us. God will prepare this banquet for all (Is 25:6; 65:13). The hungry and poor will participate (Is 55:1). The banquet symbolism entails a melodramatic element of divine judgment: the person without a wedding garment is thrown out into the dark, 'where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth' (Mt 22:11—13). The same melodramatic separation of the good and the evil appears in Matthew's account of the Last Judgment (25:31—46) and where Jesus speaks of hell in other gospel narratives (e.g. Mt 13:42; Mk 9:43—48). The peace of the banquet community is not achieved without a struggle against evils that afflict human life at every level. God is always the ultimate hope for victory in

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this struggle for peace, and Israel believes that He will send his Messiah for that purpose. When he believes himself certain of victory, the 'prince of this world' or Satan is vanquished in his struggle of cosmic dimensions with Christ (Jn 12:31; Ap 12:9—13). There is a melodramatic quality to the conflict between the forces of good and evil, between Christ (Messiah) and Satan. Christ has come to 'reduce to impotence him who held the rule of death, the devil' (Hb 2:14). We are called to choose between God and Satan, between Christ and Belial (2 Cor 6:14), between the 'evil one' and the 'true one' (1 Jn 5:18). On the last day, we shall be forever with one or the other in a state of blessedness or perdition. Salvation history is expressed melodramatically because it is experienced melodramatically. There is a melodramatic finality to the all-or-nothing state of human fulfilment or self-destruction, of love or unlove. The melodramatic version of human experience is most expressive of our present sense of an ending, our eschatological 'not-yet-but-even-now' sense of where our decisions and actions are taking us in the drama of salvation or perdition. The melodramatic version implies that our tragic version of human life best expresses our experience of what is temporary or as yet unresolved in our inner conflicts, inconsistencies or state of dividedness; and that that state will ultimately be resolved forever. Narratives of the healings and exorcisms of Jesus, of his forgiving and reconciling sinners, of his teaching and encouraging—all imply our experience of a graced liberation from the worst possible effects of our 'tragic flaws' and our ultimate hope to enjoy the fullness of that liberation with all others in the peace of our Pastoral Hero, his Father, and Spirit.

Divine revelation occurs within the realm of our human experience. That experience has pastoral, tragic, and melodramatic dimensions that constitute the context of divine revelation within the Judeo-Christian tradition. The sacred writings of this tradition contain those three dimensions and reflect thereby the experience of covenant faith. Our critical study of the pastoral, tragic, and melodramatic triptych of human experience can lead to a deeper grasp of revelation, the sacred writings, redemption, and our life in the community of Christian faith. Christ illuminates and transforms all the dimensions of our historical experience. The literary forms of pastoral, tragedy, and melodrama reflect a triptych of human experience which have their unity in the cognitive and affective dynamic of both the individual and society. In the mystery of the Incarnate Word the mystery of human experience takes on a new light. Christ, the new Adam, the Pastoral Hero of a new people, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals us to ourselves and brings to light within our historical versions of experience our most high calling.

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