SAMUEL JOHNSON
AND THE TRAGIC SENSE
They say miracles are past; and we have our philosophical persons to make modern and familiar, things supernatural and causeless. Hence it is that we make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves into seeming knowledge when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear.

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL, II.iii
SAMUEL JOHNSON
AND THE TRAGIC SENSE

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TO THEODORE REDPATH
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ABBREVIATIONS

**Dictionary**

**Hawkins**

**Hazen**
Samuel Johnson's Prefaces and Dedications, ed. Allen T. Hazen (New Haven, 1957)

**Hooker**

**Letters**

**Life**

**Lives**
The Lives of the Poets, ed. G. Birkbeck Hill, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1905). [In the interest of specifying references, these are cited as Life of Cowley, etc., except when the specific Life is already evident from the context.]

**London**

**Miscellanies**

**Nichol Smith**

**Oxford**
The Poems of Samuel Johnson, ed. D. Nichol Smith and E. L. McAdam (Oxford, 1941)

**Preface**
Preface to Shakespeare, in *Yale Works*, vol. vi

**Rasselas**
Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford, 1927). [I have however altered Chapman's chapter numbers to accord with the customary ones; he follows the second edition so scrupulously as to retain the mistake by which two chapters were numbered 28, making the total 48 instead of 49.]

**Thraliana**

**Watson**

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ABBREVIATIONS


Yale Works      The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson
                 (New Haven, 1958–). [Johnson’s poems, diaries, periodical essays, and Shakespeare criticism are all quoted from this edition.]

Zimansky       Thomas Rymer, Critical Works, ed. Curt A. Zimansky (New Haven, 1956)
I. THE PROBLEM OF TRAGEDY
IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Among the older literary historians it was a commonplace that the eighteenth century exhibits what Oliver Elton called "the sterility of the tragic sense." This circumstance, if true, accounts so neatly for the undoubtedly decline of dramatic tragedy during the period that it is hard to say which idea comes first: the death of the tragic sense proving the impossibility of tragedy, or the failure of tragedy proving the absence of a tragic sense. Whichever way one comes at the assumption, its implications are far from flattering to the age. In F. R. Leavis's view, for example, "It is significant that that century, which went in so much for formal tragedy, should have shown itself so utterly incapable of attaining the tragic."¹ The issue is not simply that a particular art form had ceased to produce masterpieces (just as Paradise Lost was the last great epic), but rather that an essential element of human experience was forgotten or denied. What is implied is a profound failure of imagination.

More recent scholars have tended to lose interest in castigating Jane Shore or Cato for being less tragic than King Lear, and have invited us to see the tragic sense as displaced into other literary forms; it is detected in the Dunciad, in Gulliver's Travels, in The Vanity of Human Wishes, and even in The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. The value of this tendency is obvious, both in revealing a greater range of implication in these works than scholars used to perceive, and in resisting the notion that "the eighteenth century" could

ever be reduced to a single view of life. Its defect, on the other hand, lies in a possible overemphasis of modern notions of the tragic at the expense both of eighteenth-century ideas on the subject and of untragic but important elements in the works themselves.

The present study aims to do two things: first, to argue that although the tragedies of the period were indeed bad, intelligent people were still capable of a genuine appreciation of earlier tragedies; and second, to explore the nature and limitations of the tragic sense as it appears in a specific writer, Samuel Johnson. In his own century Johnson could be called "the Coryphaeus of Literature"—its leader or chief—but I do not insist that he was central to the age as a whole, or even to a more limited Age of Johnson. Although he was an important figure, he was a highly individual and in some ways eccentric one. Nonetheless, he offers exceptional advantages for an investigation of this kind. Over and over again we are told, and rightly so, that he had a tragic sense of life. The only tragedy he wrote, however, is a feeble one, and his best creative work has as many affinities with satire as with tragedy. And there is the further problem of his literary criticism, which often seems obtuse about the fundamental nature of tragic drama. Can the criticism be reconciled with the "tragic sense," or are the two contradictory in some important way?

For reasons to be explained shortly, no elaborate definition of terms will be undertaken at this point; but something must be said about the crucial distinction between tragedy as genre and the tragic sense. No such

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2 A reviewer of Dr. Johnson's Table-talk called him "the Coryphaeus of Literature" in the Gentleman's Magazine, 68 (1798), 326. The phrase was perhaps borrowed from Burney's statement that "the publications respecting this literary Coryphaeus have been very numerous," in a review of Mrs. Piozzi's Anecdotes in the Monthly Review, 74 (1786), 374.
distinction was understood in the eighteenth century, which followed Aristotle in conceiving tragedy as imitating certain kinds of actions, and as arousing or otherwise influencing certain emotions in the spectator or reader. Aristotle himself was willing to call any play a tragedy which fitted his formal definitions, even a play like the *Iphigenia in Tauris* which we would probably consider wholly untragic.

In the nineteenth century a new line of thinking developed which may be summed up by Unamuno's famous phrase, "the tragic sense of life," a subject about which Aristotle has nothing to say. Unamuno denounces philosophical detachment as a denial of "the man of flesh and bone"; he is concerned with man's place in an inimical universe, in the tradition of Pascal. Such an attitude certainly has affinities with those very tragedies to which Aristotle devoted his Linnaean classification, and indeed may be said to have pervaded Greek thought. Unamuno quotes the story of the pedant who reproached Solon when he wept for the death of his son, asking "Why do you weep thus, if weeping avails nothing?" Solon replied, "Precisely for that reason—because it does not avail." In Unamuno's view, we inhabit a hostile universe, and no philosophical consolation is of any use to us; "It is as if one should say to a man whose leg has had to be amputated that it does not help him at all to think about it." This tragic sense may be found in literature of many kinds; Unamuno calls Spinoza's *Ethics* "a despairing elegiac poem."³

Between Aristotle's and Unamuno's positions an enormous range of theories has evolved, emphasizing either the generic form or the metaphysical view according to the predisposition of the theorist, but generally assuming some degree of connection between the two, and warning against using the term "tragic" too

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loosely. A useful example is Stephen Dedalus' famous definition: "Pity is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the human sufferer. Terror is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the secret cause." Here Aristotle's classic terms are developed in an eloquent statement which manages to suggest, in the haunting phrase "the secret cause," the cruel but perhaps not wholly arbitrary mystery at the heart of tragic experience. Stephen continues his exposition with a negative illustration:

A girl got into a hansom a few days ago, he went on, in London. She was on her way to meet her mother whom she had not seen for many years. At the corner of a street the shaft of a lorry shivered the window of the hansom in the shape of a star. A long fine needle of the shivered glass pierced her heart. She died on the instant. The reporter called it a tragic death. It is not. It is remote from terror and pity according to the terms of my definitions.\(^4\)

One sees very well what is meant, and yet the story may contain more of the tragic than Stephen is prepared to concede. When one of Hakluyt's seafarers writes "Our voyage ended tragically," he is responding to something that everyone feels. Bradley put it well when he suggested that "this central feeling is the impression of waste."\(^5\) While the anecdote of the girl in the hansom is far less tragic than Antigone or Othello, it does not follow that it is not tragic at all. It involves death, and also the sense (minimal, since Stephen has


only sketched the story) of what Bradley calls “waste.” In addition I should like to argue that every experience which we call tragic is made so by the imaginative grasp with which it is apprehended. Joyce’s example is not imaginatively neutral, just because of the way he has chosen to tell it. Its organization, its rhythms, and even its imagery (“shivered the window of the hansom in the shape of a star”) conspire to present a story which, although brief, has a form and a resonance which it would not have received in an ordinary newspaper account. In miniature it is the imitation of an action.

In such an example as Joyce’s, the term “tragic” is understood to be inappropriate because the action is not represented at any length, because the girl is unimportant until we know more about her, and because the occasion of her death is a fortuitous accident rather than an intelligible event. One may perhaps disagree with such a position, but there is no question of refuting it, for this is not a subject where right and wrong have absolute meaning. I have touched upon it simply as a means of indicating my own working assumption, that tragedy as a literary form is something quite different from a tragic sense, and that the latter is capable of much wider (and no doubt vaguer) application than the former. At its furthest remove from generic tragedy it dwells upon the simple fact of human suffering, expressly distinguishing it as a condition from the kinds of actions that find embodiment in art. In Wordsworth’s language,

Action is transitory—a step, a blow, . . .
Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark,
And shares the nature of infinity.⁶

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Something like this is implied in Joyce's "secret cause," and in the Shakespearean "unknown fear" which appears in my epigraph. As applied to Johnson and his contemporaries, both phrases suggest a mystery which at once intensifies dread and limits analysis. Lacking terms to elucidate an unknown fear, the moralist or critic may only imperfectly understand his own insights, or may choose to redefine them in less unsettling ways.

But granting that this tragic sense has a real existence, it can go only a little way toward explaining the peculiar power of the great tragic masterpieces. My principal reason for avoiding any formal theory of tragedy here is not to deny its value, but rather to resist prejudgment. Men in the eighteenth century approached the whole subject so differently from ourselves that, as I shall try to show, they could scarcely have understood it as we do. If therefore they were to be measured against any modern theory—and my own would carry no particular authority—they would be found hopelessly lacking before the investigation was well under way. My intention therefore is to examine their ideas in something like their own terms, and to criticize their inadequacies in specific contexts. The problem of the definition of tragedy will receive fuller treatment in the concluding chapter.

Finally, it is well to recall Huxley's observation that tragedy is not the whole truth. A dispassionate view might suppose that life has in it both happy and unhappy elements from which the artist selects, and that he may sometimes create tragedy out of the latter. But if we aspire to rescue the eighteenth century from the stigma (assuming that it is a stigma) of the Peace of the Augustans, we may be inclined to dwell upon some ele-

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ments of its art at the expense of others. Thus the spacious comedy of *Tom Jones*, where no Blifil can triumph forever, and where Sophia is forever beautiful and young, is described as a consciously imaginary alternative to the depressing reality of life as it is actually lived. Sterne's wit is interpreted as the desperate heroism of a dying man: Yorick the death's head as well as jester. The satiric glee of Pope and Swift is seen as the product of their deeper gloom. And Johnson becomes a tragic hero. All of these interpretations carry a measure of truth, but none perhaps the whole truth. Johnson's tragic sense certainly exists, but it is not necessarily the same as ours, it does not inform all of his works equally, and he himself might have been quite indignant at our desire to identify it in him.
CHAPTER 2

Tragic Theory and Its Limitations

1. The Definition of Tragedy

Critics before the nineteenth century only touch occasionally and obliquely on the metaphysical aspect of tragedy. Now and then an extraordinary passage will stand out from the page, as when Sidney remarks that tragedy “openeth the greatest woundes, and sheweth forth the Ulcers that are covered with Tissue.” Racine has a profound phrase which John Dennis thought good enough to copy, “cette tristesse majestueuse qui fait tout le plaisir de la tragédie.” The infrequency of such passages forbids us to make too much of them; and yet what do we learn if we concentrate on the preferred topics of the neoclassical critics?¹

The critic, to be sure, does not necessarily speak for all of his contemporaries, and in an important sense he does not even speak for himself. He reduces his relatively intuitive and unreflecting literary response to a conventional form of discourse in which he is obliged to use a set of inherited terms, many of which he takes so much for granted that he never thinks of examining them. Pope, pondering one of the self-perpetuating staples of neoclassical criticism, pointed out that it owed more to polemical opportunism than to reality.

It is ever the nature of Parties to be in extremes; and nothing is so probable, as that because Ben Johnson had much the most learning, it was said on the one hand that Shakespear had none at all;

¹ Sidney, Defence of Poesie, in Prose Works, ed. Albert Feuillerat (Cambridge, 1962), iii, 23. Racine, preface to Bérénice; Dennis borrows the phrase in the preface to his Iphigenia (1700): “that majestick Sadness which makes the pleasure of Tragedy” (Hooker, ii, 390).
and because Shakespeare had much the most wit and fancy, it was retorted on the other, that Johnson wanted both. . . . Nay the spirit of opposition ran so high, that whatever those of the one side objected to the other, was taken at the rebound, and turned into Praises; as injudiciously as their antagonists before had made them Objections.

(Preface to Shakespeare, Nichol Smith, p. 50)

The repetitive quality of much of the dramatic criticism should warn us against regarding all of it with equal respectfulness. An original mind like Dryden or Dennis amply repays study, while a Gildon or a Welsted may occasionally swell the chorus on some disputed point, but seldom with much originality or interest.

Furthermore, the elaborate "rules" of the more strictly neoclassical critics, which used to excite the solemn outrage of literary scholars, were in general the obsession of bookish theorists rather than of playwrights or audiences.2 Warburton rightly observed that most of the champions of these rules hardly deserve consideration:

Tho' it be very true, as Mr. Pope hath observed, that Shakespeare is the fairest and fullest subject for

2 The last book to undertake in detail the subject of my introductory essay is Clarence C. Green's The Neo-Classical Theory of Tragedy in England During the Eighteenth Century (Cambridge, Mass., 1934). This work, which still invariably appears in bibliographies, is organized on the assumption that "the rules" were first promulgated and then attacked. There is virtually no reference to actual plays, and no attempt to ask why a particular critic would make a particular statement or to distinguish intelligent writers from parrots.

I should mention that I attach no specific set of limiting definitions to the term "neoclassicism," but use it loosely to refer to the prevailing tendencies of critical discourse in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in England and France.
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criticism, yet it is not such a sort of criticism as may be raised mechanically on the Rules which Dacier, Rapin and Bossu have collected from Antiquity; and of which, such kind of Writers as Rymer, Gildon, Dennis and Oldmixon, have only gathered and chewed the Husks. . . . The kind of criticism here required is such as judgeth our Author by those only Laws and Principles on which he wrote, NATURE, and COMMON-SENSE.3

To be sure, Dryden began his career under the spell of French aesthetics, and declared in an early prologue,

He who writ this, not without pains and thought,  
From French and English theatres has brought  
Th' exactest rules by which a play is wrought.  
(Secret Love, Watson, i, 107)

But if one examines Dryden's dramatic works (apart from All for Love), it is hard to feel that a faithful observance of the rules is their leading characteristic. "Many a fair precept in poetry," he wrote when his career as a playwright was almost over, "is like a seeming demonstration in the mathematics: very specious in the diagram, but failing in the mechanic operation" (Preface to Sylvaes, Watson, ii, 19).

Let us suppose that the technical complications of neoclassical theory are swept aside. What idea of tragedy remains? In the popular imagination, it has always been defined by its subject matter, rather than by Aristotelian considerations of structure or effect. To borrow Martin Opitz's comprehensive statement of 1624, it is concerned with "royal decisions, manslaughter, despair, infanticides and patricides, conflagrations, incest, wars and rebellions, lamenting, screaming, sighing and the

3 Preface to The Works of Shakespeare (1747), Nichol Smith, p. 97.
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like." In Johnson's Dictionary, on the other hand, the definition of tragedy is much more limited: "1. A dramatick representation of a serious action. 2. Any mournful or dreadful event." The second illustration for the latter is, "I look upon this now done in England as another act of the same tragedy which was lately begun in Scotland. K[ing] Ch[arles]." On the analogy of tragedy on the stage, the mournful or dreadful events of life can be seen as tragic. But when he is actually defining literary tragedy, Johnson simply speaks of "a serious action." There is nothing here about metaphysical terror, nothing about lamenting, screaming, sighing and the like.

In Dryden's case, we have no definition of tragedy, and there are serious inadequacies in his famous definition of a play. "Lisideius, after some modest denials, at last confessed he had a rude notion of it; . . . he conceived a play ought to be A just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humours, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind" (Essay of Dramatic Poesy, Watson, 1, 25). Crites quite sensibly objects that this is a definition a genere et fine, but nobody seems to mind very much, and by the end of the colloquy we find Dryden/Neander accepting it as his own (p. 122). That is to say, here is a definition of a play which in no way restricts it to the drama, even though for most of the Essay Dryden is concerned with specifically dramatic problems: the value of the unities, the suitability of rhyme. For Aristotle tragedy was first and foremost

*Buch von der deutschen Poeterey, as quoted by Karl S. Guthke in Modern Tragicomedy (New York, 1966), p. 7. Opitz goes on to say that comedies are about "weddings, festivities, gambling, the cheating and roguishness of servants, vainglorious mercenaries, love affairs, the wantonness of youth, the avarice of old age, pandering and such things as happen daily among common people."
the imitation of an action; for Dryden it is an image of human nature. He even betrays a remarkable kind of antitheatrical prejudice, as if the only true literature existed on the printed page: "In a playhouse, everything contributes to impose upon the judgment: the lights, the scenes, the habits, and, above all, the grace of action, which is commonly the best where there is the most need of it, surprise the audience, and cast a mist upon their understandings" (Preface to The Spanish Friar, Watson, I, 275).

When he undertook to distinguish between tragedy and comedy, the best Dryden could manage was the idea that tragedy is elevated and impressive. "Were there neither judge, taste, nor opinion in the world, yet they would differ in their natures; for the action, character, and language of tragedy would still be great and high; that of comedy lower and more familiar; admiration would be the delight of one, and satire of the other" (Defence of An Essay . . ., Watson, I, 119). This description of tragedy, like Lisideius' definition of a play, would apply with equal justice to epic, and in fact Dryden saw tragedy and epic as much the same thing. Neander notices no great difference between them except that tragedy has actors who speak dialogue (Dramatic Poesy, Watson, I, 87-88), and late in life—with some support from Aristotle—Dryden saw the distinction as chiefly one of scale: "Tragedy is the miniature of human life; an epic poem is the draught at length" (Preface to the Aeneis, Watson, II, 226). There is nothing unusual in this identification, which is found in Hobbes in 1650, Kames in 1762, and Cumberland in 1807. Even Aristotle's venerable pair of tragic emotions could be applied to epic, as in Gibbon's account of his youthful reaction to Pope's Homer: "In the death of Hector, and the shipwreck of Ulysses, I tasted the new emotions of terror and pity."5

5 Hobbes, in his Answer to D'Avenant's Preface to Gondibert:

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This attempt to assimilate tragedy to epic recurred because epic was officially the most admired of all literary forms, and because for many readers it apparently did afford the fullest satisfaction of their literary tastes. The heroic plays which for a time embodied their ideal have an extravagant vitality and charm, and the cleverness of Buckingham’s *Rehearsal* should not be allowed to obscure the pleasure they can give. But as Pope’s Homer was a pretty thing but not Homer, so many of these tragedies are not really tragedies. This is no grounds for reprobation; it is only evidence that Dryden, for example, however much he may have talked about tragedy, did not mean what we do by the term. More generally, there are two notions here which ought not to be confused: (1) that people at that time had an inadequate idea of what tragedy is (which is quite possibly true); (2) that if we could only take them aside and explain it to them, they would be grateful, and would stop wanting to see plays that resemble epics.

To complicate matters further, the critical language of the Restoration lived on to haunt the eighteenth century long after the death of the heroic drama to which it had been related, even while Dryden’s ideal of “admiration” gave way to a consistent emphasis on pity as

“For the Heroique Poem narrative, such as is yours, is called an Epique Poem. The Heroique Poem Dramatique is Tragedy”; Kames, in *Elements of Criticism*, ch. 22; Cumberland in his *Memoirs* (London, 1807, 11, 260): “The tragic drama may be not improperly described as an epic poem of compressed action.” Gibbon is quoted from the *Memoirs*, ed. Georges A. Bonnard (New York, 1969), p. 37. As Robert D. Hume observes, Dryden was interested all his life in the heroic, and when he came to see that the drama should be more naturalistic than he had once maintained—thus accepting, for example, Sir Robert Howard’s attack on rhyming plays—he transferred this abiding interest to the epic, where in a way it had always belonged (*Dryden’s Criticism* [Ithaca, 1970], ch. 6).