

THE THEORY OF KATHARSIS

FROM DRYDEN TO JOHNSON.

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS  
In the Graduate College  
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

1961

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## PREFACE

The present study of the eighteenth century's interpretation of Aristotle's statement of the function of tragedy was undertaken in the hope that the history of this small, but significant, segment of critical doctrine might provide some insight into a complex period in literary criticism. Writers of the period emphasized the reasonableness of the neoclassical rules of art as guides to a proper and refined "taste," yet, at the same time, they suspected that great art somehow transcends the rationality of the rules, and is based upon emotional responses. Aristotle's tragic katharsis was chosen as a focal point for the present study because, while it was of that body of ancient criticism upon which the rules of art were based, it was yet susceptible to a purely emotional interpretation.

No attempt has been made to relate the present study of katharsis to its practical applications in eighteenth century literature, for literary criticism is but loosely related to the literary productions of an era, and is perhaps best studied as a branch of the history of ideas. The concern was not with what Aristotle meant by katharsis, but with what the critics of the period thought he meant, and with their reasons for rejecting or ignoring parts of his definition of tragedy. Such critical questions have their economic, political, and religious connections, but

this study has been confined to the critical question of katharsis, and its connections with the then current psychological, aesthetic, and moral questions.

So limited, the question has been examined as it is reflected in the major British critical works from the time of Dryden to the death of Samuel Johnson. The critical opinions of Alexander Gerard, and certain minor English and French critics have been derived from secondary sources. In addition, much of the material that outlines Renaissance critical theory has been taken from secondary sources, principally J. E. Spingarn's "A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance" (New York, 1899), Marvin Theodore Herrick's "The Poetics of Aristotle in England" (New Haven, 1930), and Clarence C. Green's "Neo-Classical Theory of Tragedy in England During the Eighteenth Century" (Cambridge, Mass., 1934). Green, who attempts a unified treatment of the decline of the neoclassical theory of tragedy, has been most helpful. Although his is an extensive survey, the present study was yet thought to be justified by its search for causes, and the resulting speculations as to the relation between the interpretations of katharsis and the eighteenth century's concern with moral philosophy, psychology of association, and aesthetics of the sublime. Herrick, in the two chapters he devotes to the eighteenth century, was helpful in certain areas, although his principal concern is with the various translations of Aristotle's Poetics rather than with the interpretations of the concepts.

In tracing the theories of the function of tragedy during the

second half of the eighteenth century, Earl R. Wasserman's article, "The Pleasures of Tragedy," ELH, XIV, No. 4 (1947), 283-307, and A. O. Aldridge's article "The Pleasures of Pity," ELH, XVI, No. 1, (1949), 76-87, were particularly useful for their analyses of the influence of the doctrine of benevolence and sympathy upon that theory. Samuel Holt Monk's careful analysis of the trends of psychology and aesthetics in The Sublime (Ann Arbor, 1960), was most useful and suggestive, as was René Welleck's A History of Modern Criticism (New Haven, 1955). Welleck, in a general and comprehensive way, suggests a basic view of causes and effects that was confirmed in a small, but specific way by the present study.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

It has been suggested by Roland S. Crane that it is possible, "without undue simplification to tell the story of development of criticism in England, from Dryden to the death of Johnson, in terms of a single dominant conception of the art."<sup>1</sup> What Crane has reference to is the period's concern with the artist's ability to please his audience, and the resulting speculations into the natural sources of pleasure in the minds of men. It was, therefore, a concern with "taste". Critics of the period felt that the evaluation of the pleasures of art should be based on something more universal than the actual preferences of individuals. It must, they felt, rest on proper standards of the art or genre "as expressed abstractly in the precepts of criticism."<sup>2</sup> In their search for rules to support a standard of taste, they were generally divided only by their estimations as to how far these rules should be based, on the mind of the observer, rather than on the study of great works of art. Most commentators of the period considered both sources as essential, but the shift of emphasis during the period was away from the study of models toward the observer's experience.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Roland S. Crane, "English Neoclassical Criticism: An Outline Sketch," Critics and Criticism, Ancient and Modern, ed. R. S. Crane et al. (Chicago, 1952), p. 374.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 380.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

The increasing tendency to base rules of art upon experience was coincident with the rise of modern subjective aesthetics. It would seem feasible for this well publicized new investigation into subjective emotional responses to have produced an emotional interpretation of katharsis. But it did not. Other factors had a greater influence. Alfred North Whitehead cautions the student of the history of ideas:

Do not chiefly direct your attention to those intellectual positions which its exponents feel it necessary explicitly to defend. There will be some fundamental assumptions which adherents of all the various systems within the epoch unconsciously presuppose.<sup>4</sup>

Much of the eighteenth century criticism focused on the pleasures of art, but in the works of almost all critics there is, at least implicitly, the demand that art both please and instruct. This demand for one dual function of literature, which was stated in England by Sir Philip Sidney,<sup>5</sup> was erroneously assumed by the century to have been one of Horace's precepts.<sup>6</sup> One of the principal conclusions of the present study is that the very critics who are sometimes characterized as pre-Romantic proponents of subjective art, were so bound to this neo-Horatian idea of the two-fold purpose of art that they discarded the one interpretation of Aristotle's katharsis that was essentially emotional in

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<sup>4</sup>Alfred North Whitehead, quoted by Marjorie Hope Nicolson, Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory (Ithaca, N. Y., 1959), p. 27.

<sup>5</sup>"An Apologie for Poetrie," The Great Critics, ed. Smith and Parks, (New York, 1932), p. 213.

<sup>6</sup>More recent translations reveal that Horace said that the aim of the poet was to instruct, or please, or both. Cf. "Epistle to the Pisos," trans. J. H. and S. C. Smith, The Great Critics, p. 124.

its operation, and that, as a result of their predilection, Aristotle's katharsis was distorted, diluted, and finally discarded.

The observation that the katharsis was distorted and discarded does not presuppose any particular interpretation of the katharsis theory; it has reference only to the statement of the katharsis clause in Aristotle's definition of tragedy:

Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper katharsis, or purgation, of these emotions.<sup>7</sup>

Because this translation is substantially the same as those available to the eighteenth century, it has been used as one of the constants of this study, along with the suggestion of Joseph E. Gillet<sup>8</sup> that the katharsis clause describes two functions: (1), the excitation of the emotions of pity and fear, which he terms the "mediate end," and (2), the katharsis, or purgation, of these emotions, which he calls the "ultimate end." Welleck's<sup>9</sup> statement that the critics of the eighteenth century seem not to have understood Aristotle's katharsis is no doubt based on the observation that, in general, their concern was only the

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<sup>7</sup>S. H. Butcher, Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art, (4th ed., 1951), p. 240.

<sup>8</sup>Joseph E. Gillet "The Catharsis Clause in German Criticism Before Lessing," J.P., XXXV (1920), p. 95.

<sup>9</sup>René Welleck, A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950, Vol. 1: The Later Eighteenth Century (New Haven, Conn., 1955), p. 118.

"mediate end," the excitation of emotion.<sup>10</sup>

So that discussion of the various eighteenth century positions may have a common point of reference, the writer of the present study has found it necessary to set forth as a constant, the homeopathic interpretation of katharsis, as expressed by Butcher. This homeopathic theory was developed in the mid-nineteenth century by H. Weil and Jacob Bernays,<sup>11</sup> and was further elaborated by later nineteenth century critics. As the present study is not concerned with Aristotle's meaning, but with the various interpretations of the katharsis between Dryden and the death of Johnson, this homeopathic interpretation is not set forth as a constant because the writer of the present study considers it to contain Aristotle's meaning. Nor is it established as a constant because it represents the end toward which eighteenth century criticism was progressing. It was selected as a constant because it is an interpretation which the eighteenth century might have forwarded, but did not.

Most proponents of the homeopathic interpretation assume that Aristotle's statement of katharsis was the result of his desire to effectively answer Plato's notion that art corrupts the

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<sup>10</sup>Eari R. Wasserman, "The Pleasures of Tragedy," ELH, XIV, No. 4 (1947), p. 283.

<sup>11</sup>Butcher, p. 244.

individual by nourishing his passions.<sup>12</sup> Aristotle's answer, they assert, was that tragedy provides a safe outlet for disturbing passions, the katharsis denoting "a pathological effect on the soul analogous to the effect of medicine on the body."<sup>13</sup> Thus, through a controlled indulgence, the passions are calmed and "an emotional cure has been wrought."<sup>14</sup> Butcher, developing the homeopathic interpretation, insists that Aristotle called for the excitation and purgation of both pity and fear - not pity alone, nor pity and admiration.<sup>15</sup> He holds that the pity and fear of The Poetics are related emotions: "pity turns into fear where the object is so nearly related to us that the suffering seems to be our own....We pity for others where under like circumstances we should fear for ourselves."<sup>16</sup> This pity, having in it a latent fear, is self-regarding, a thing apart from the altruistic instinct of compassion."<sup>17</sup> Katharsis, so viewed, turns upon an inner likeness through which the audience may find sympathetic identification with the tragic sufferer.<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that Butcher

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<sup>12</sup>David Daiches, Critical Approaches to Literature (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1956), p. 39.

<sup>13</sup>Butcher, p. 244.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 246.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 263.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 253.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 257.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 260.

asserts that there is little support to the assumption of many commentators that epic poetry excites the same emotions as tragedy.<sup>19</sup>

Why the eighteenth century's subjective aestheticians of the school of sympathy did not arrive at the homeopathic interpretation of katharsis by forwarding a definition of pity, which, through sympathetic identification, could be related to the emotion of fear is a question of major importance to this study; it is a question that is based in the century's concern over the proper source of the standard of taste, and it will be approached after a survey of the interpretations of katharsis that were current in the closing years of the seventeenth century.

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 25ln.

## CHAPTER II

### THE KATHARSIS IN ENGLAND PRIOR TO THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

#### The Renaissance Theory of Tragedy

A homeopathic theory of katharsis in the eighteenth century would not have been without precedent, for Weil and Bernays in the mid-nineteenth century were but developing an idea that had been set forth in the Renaissance. Milton, echoing Minturno's suggestion,<sup>20</sup> likened Aristotle's katharsis to a medical purge, saying that the function of tragedy is:

...by raising pity and fear, or terror, to purge the mind of those and such like passions; that is to temper and reduce them to just measure with a kind of delight, stirr'd up by reading or seeing those passions well imitated.

Nor is Nature wanting in her own efforts to make good his assertion; for so in Physic, things of melancholic hue and quality are us'd against melancholy, sower against sower, salt to remove salt humours.<sup>21</sup>

So stated, the effect of katharsis is not moral, but emotional; it acts on the feelings and not on the will.<sup>22</sup> This theory, however, found no more than occasional utterance, for it was foreign to the

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<sup>20</sup>Joel Elias Spingarn, A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance (New York, 1899), pp. 80f.

<sup>21</sup>John Milton, "Preface to Samson Agonistes," Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century, ed. J.E. Spingarn (Oxford, 1908), I, 207-8.

<sup>22</sup>Spingarn, History, p. 75.

dialectic spirit that pervaded the criticism from 1550 to 1750.<sup>23</sup>

The second and more dominant theory advanced in the Renaissance was the ethical interpretation of katharsis.<sup>24</sup> Here what was sought was not emotional relief, but the curbing of emotion; the aim was "not the gratifications of the individual but his moral improvement."<sup>25</sup>

The general position of the Renaissance was that literature should teach and delight: katharsis was instructive, and instruction was delightful. The function of tragedy was to affect the will, and purgation was interpreted to mean either the purification, or the hardening of the emotions that resulted from familiarity with events likely to stir pity and fear.<sup>26</sup> The delightfully instructed audience found additional pleasure in perusing the moral vigour and resistance of the tragic characters, a concept so in accord with the continuing didacticism of neoclassical writers that it was central to the aesthetic thought of Richard Payne Knight in the early nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup>

While not rejecting the idea that moral instruction is delightful, Sir Philip Sidney felt that delight was often prerequisite to

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<sup>23</sup>Welleck, p. 5. Gillet, p. 96. Spingarn, History, p. 81, notes that in Milton and Minturno the katharsis is secondary to tragedy's ethical aim.

<sup>24</sup>Clarence C. Green, The Neo-Classic Theory of Tragedy in England During the Eighteenth Century (Cambridge, Mass., 1934), p. 6. Cf. Spingarn, History, p. 75.

<sup>25</sup>Gillet, p. 96.

<sup>26</sup>Baxter Levering Hathaway, "The Lucretian Return Upon Ourselves in Eighteenth Century Theories of Tragedy," PMLA, LXII (Sept., 1947), p. 673n. Cf. Welleck, p. 22.

<sup>27</sup>Wasserman, p. 286.

instruction. Writers, he said, "as they scorne to delight, so must they bee content little to moove,"<sup>28</sup> and "who," he asks, "will be taught, if hee be not mooved with desire to be taught?"<sup>29</sup> For Sidney, tragedy aids morality, for by example it teaches men to fear improper behavior. The audience is moved by "stuiring the affects of admiration and commiseration," and commiseration teaches "the uncertainty of this world, and upon how weake foundations guilden roofes are builded."<sup>30</sup>

It is more difficult to account for Sidney's substitution of "admiration" for "fear" than it is to explain his reading "commiseration" for "pity". Minturno, in 1559, had said that poetry should teach delight, and also stir admiration.<sup>31</sup> Sidney, however, seems to have been the first to include "admiration" in the tragic formula, and its appearance there is obviously coincident with the disassociation of pity from fear.<sup>32</sup> When the raising of "admiration" as well as "pity and (or) fear," becomes the function of tragedy, purging has been

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<sup>28</sup>Sidney, p. 207.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., pp. 210 f.

<sup>31</sup>Marvin Theodore Herrick, The Poetics of Aristotle in England (New Haven, 1930), pp. 27f. Cf. Green, p. 27.

<sup>32</sup>Samuel Holt Monk, in The Sublime (Ann Arbor, 1960), p. 32. notes that "admiration" carries with it the generic meaning of "wonder". To the German interpreters of the Poetics, admiratio was that "astonishment" or "surprise" which enhances the fable (Gillet, p. 109). This "astonishment" is a part of tragic fear (Infra., Dennis on "terror"). It might be speculated that one of Sidney's sources had, by a liberal translation, related admiratio to fear. However Sidney himself uses admiration in the modern sense.

abandoned. As Green observes, admiration is a basic psychological foe to the effects that Aristotle considered legitimate for tragedy to produce.<sup>33</sup>

A natural consequence of the moral interpretation of katharsis was the introduction of the principle of poetic justice. It appears in Sidney and Bears, of course, a relationship to admiration, for a virtuous hero need be admired so that his rewards will be properly instructive. Poetic justice was, as Welleck<sup>34</sup> points out, a version of the ethical ideal. Perhaps it came to be a quality demanded of tragedy because tragedy and the epic were considered to be of the same genre. The virtuous epic hero "had a definite function of representing ideal human nature."<sup>35</sup>

The Theory of Tragedy  
at the End of the Seventeenth Century

Thomas Rymer's dramatic criticism (1677-1693)

While the concept of poetic justice can be traced to Plato, the term itself comes from Thomas Rymer,<sup>36</sup> who is generally considered the most rigid of the neoclassical critics.<sup>37</sup> Although a votary of Aristotle, he reflects the same ideas about the tragic function that

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<sup>33</sup>Green, p. 29.

<sup>34</sup>Welleck, p. 17.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Thomas Rymer, The Critical Works of Thomas Rymer, ed. C. A. Zimansky (New Haven, 1956), p. 201.

<sup>37</sup>Herrick, p. 60.

Sidney did. He holds that the poet's function is "to move pity,"<sup>38</sup> and that the end of all poetry is to please, but this is modified by his observation that "whoever writes a tragedy cannot please but must also profit."<sup>39</sup> The profit, or instruction, transmitted is that this is a harmonious and orderly universe, as displayed by the machinations of poetic justice. Thus it is "that tragedy more conduces to the instruction of Mankind, than even Philosophy itself."<sup>40</sup>

As Rymer's editor Curt A. Zimansky notes, Rymer occasionally followed the neoclassical tendency to "graft Horace onto Aristotle."<sup>41</sup> However, Rymer was so ardent in his admiration of Aristotle that he went against the current of his age by resisting the spell of the Epic.<sup>42</sup>

While not clearly making genre distinctions between the functions of tragedy and epic poetry, he did refrain from substituting "admiration" for the kathartic "fear," and held pity and fear to be the tragic functions. His interpretation of pity can be equated to Sidney's commiseration, but he does not define fear. Nor does he explain how fear, as one of the ends of tragedy, contributes to either pleasure or to that moral instruction achieved through a display of poetic justice. But this "Don Quixote of literary criticism," through

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<sup>38</sup>Rymer, p. 28.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 182.

<sup>42</sup>Herrick, p. 60.

his pedantic insistence that Aristotle's "pity and fear" are the only tragic passions, influenced the dramatic criticism of John Dryden.

John Dryden's early dramatic criticism (1668-1677).

In his early critical works Dryden's comments upon the function of tragedy are reminiscent of Sidney. The neoclassical demand that poetry fulfil the neo-Horatian purpose of both teaching and pleasing appears in Dryden's first sustained critical work, "An Essay of Dramatic Poesy" (1668), where the dogma is applied to the drama. Here, Dryden's character Eugenius says a play should 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.<sup>43</sup>

In commenting on this passage, Green<sup>44</sup> says that Dryden has substituted "delight and instruction," for Aristotle's "purgation of the emotions of pity and fear." This is somewhat misleading, for later on in the same essay Dryden twice says that the specific end of tragedy is to beget "pleasing admiration and concernment."<sup>45</sup> The raising of "admiration and concernment" then, is Dryden's rendering of "purgation of pity and fear," and it recalls Sidney's "admiration and commiseration."

Eugenius' definition of a "play" does little in the way of separating that genre from the epic, for at this time Dryden held that the "Genius of them is the same...so is the end, namely, for the delight

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<sup>43</sup>John Dryden, Essays of John Dryden, ed. W. P. Ker (Oxford, 1900), I, 36.

<sup>44</sup>Green, p. 8.

<sup>45</sup>Dryden, Essays, Ker, I, 53. Cf. Ibid., p. 58.

and benefit of mankind."<sup>46</sup> Once more, in "A Defence of an Essay of Dramatic Poesy," Dryden might as well have been writing of epic poetry when he said the purpose of serious plays is "to affect the soul, and excite the passions, and above all to move admiration."<sup>47</sup>

The stirring of admiration was related to the creation of an "ideal" tragic hero, and hence to the whole concept of "the ideal." This is, in turn, related to Dryden's early defense of verse plays, for he asserts that prose is

too near the nature of converse: there may be too great a likeness; as the most skillful painters affirm...to take every lineament and feature, is not to make an excellent piece;...take so much only as will make a beautiful resemblance of the whole;...heighten the beauties of some parts, and hide the deformities of the rest.<sup>48</sup>

Moving an audience to admiration can best be accomplished through portraying an ideal hero; he must be unlike his audience; therefore, it is best if he speaks in verse.

This early position of Dryden is the antithesis of that which holds sympathetic identification requisite to the homeopathic purgation of fear and pity. As has been observed, admiration restricts the tragic function to the mediate end, the excitation of emotion.

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>47</sup>John Dryden, Dramatic Essays, ed. Ernest Rhys (London, 1912), p. 62. Four years later Dryden said that the aim of the English Heroic Play is to realize that "superhuman grandeur" which is the soul of epic poetry, (Essays, Ker, I, lvii). The creation of this new genre points to the desire of that era to invest all great art with those morally instructive qualities they found in epic poetry.

<sup>48</sup>Dryden, Dramatic Essays, Rhys, p. 63.

Dryden's later dramatic criticism. (1678-1697)

Ker has observed that "Dryden began to write as a critic of the Drama while he was still finding his way, and, unhappily there was no way to be found."<sup>49</sup> Herrick<sup>50</sup> finds Dryden inconsistent as to what the function of tragedy should be. This inconsistency, however, seems to be but the result of two general positions taken at different times. Dryden's early position holds together as logically as does Sidney's criticism, which it resembles. The various facets of Dryden's later criticism are also logically related one to another, and the study of these positions suggests that Dryden did, after all, "find his way."

Dryden's new position, which contradicted most of the points of his earlier theory, was first set forth in "The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy" (1679), and there is general agreement among commentators that it was influenced by Rymer, whose "Tragedies of the Last Age" had been published in August, 1677.<sup>51</sup> Rymer evidently spurred Dryden into probing for Aristotle's meaning, and the result was the essay which Herrick calls "the best interpretation of Aristotle's remarks any Englishman had yet offered."<sup>52</sup> Dryden has here abandoned "admiration," and holds that the emotions proper to tragedy are "pity and fear." He now considers both sides of the katharsis

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<sup>49</sup>Dryden, Essays, Ker, I, xx.

<sup>50</sup>Herrick, p. 66.

<sup>51</sup>Rymer, pp. xxv ff. Cf. Herrick, p. 67.

<sup>52</sup>Herrick, p. 67.

formula, the purgation as well as the excitation of emotion:

The end or scope of Tragedy...is, to rectify or purge our passions, fear, and pity.

To instruct delightfully is the general end of all poetry....To purge the passions by example is therefore the particular instruction which belongs to Tragedy.<sup>53</sup>

The purgation, so viewed, is a purification that corrects by example. Although the result desired is moral instruction, this purgation works on the emotions, but it does so through the mind.

The emotions purged from the audience are clearly different from those excited. "Pride" and "want of commiseration" are corrected, or purged;<sup>54</sup> to cure mankind of these two vices,

the inventors of Tragedy have chosen to work upon two other passions, which are fear and pity. We are wrought to fear by...some terrible examples of misfortune,...for such an action demonstrates to us that no condition is privileged from the turns of fortune; this must of necessity cause terror in us, and consequently abate our pride.<sup>55</sup>

Terror, so conceived, is related to pity for, Dryden continues, when our pride is removed, so also is our want of commiseration: we pity and want to be helpful to the distressed. The removal of pride, the end to which tragedy's instruction leads, is the result of an act of the reason.

Eighteen years later Dryden was still expressing the same formula in his "Dedication of the Aeneis" (1697).<sup>56</sup> In this late work

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<sup>53</sup>Dryden, Dramatic Essays, Rhys, p. 131. See ibid., pp. 129f for Dryden's rendition of Aristotle's definition of tragedy.

<sup>54</sup>Cf. Rymer, xxxvi, where Zimansky notes that Dryden is here following Rapin.

<sup>55</sup>Dryden, Dramatic Essays, Rhys, p. 131.

<sup>56</sup>Dryden, Essays, Ker, II, 158.

he speaks of the high pleasure which "raises the soul and hardens it to virtue."<sup>57</sup> This pleasure is made of stern stuff, but it is evidently the pleasure that is a part of the "delightful instruction" of tragedy's katharsis.

Dryden, having interpreted Aristotle's katharsis statement so that it fulfilled the demand that art both teach and delight, subsequently sensed that its power to teach was limited for the reason that the habits of a lifetime cannot be altered by three hours exposure to the "great effects of tragedy," which are "too violent to be lasting."<sup>58</sup> Instead of attacking the demand for didacticism, Dryden concluded that tragedy is inferior to epic poetry, which is "undoubtedly the greatest work...the soul of man is capable to perform."<sup>59</sup> His early preference for tragedy is gone, and he asks:

What virtue is there in a tragedy which is not contained in an epic poem, where pride is humbled, virtue rewarded, and vice punished?<sup>60</sup>

The two are no longer considered as one genre: their functions and effects are different. The epic, which can raise admiration, is the proper home for a morally instructive poetic justice; it can express ideal truth about ideal heroes in the ideal language of verse.

Dryden no longer defends verse as the proper tragic medium, and this reversal is coincident with his rejecting admiration as a

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 159.

tragic emotion. There may be a relation between the two, but to speculate that Dryden changed his position on verse because Rymer had prodded him into studying Aristotle is to ignore the possibility that Dryden may have been influenced in this matter by Boileau's translation of "Longinus" "On the Sublime".

When Dryden recommended verse because it heightened beauties and obscured deformities, he may have been calling for rhetorical sublimity. Boileau's translation in 1674 of On the Sublime, however, emphasized that elevation of the soul through art is not so much due to magnificence of language as it is to grandeur of thought and nobility of sentiment.<sup>61</sup> The first impact of Boileau's translation has been traced to Dryden's "Apology for Heroic Poetry,"<sup>62</sup> which appeared in the same year (1677) as Rymer's "Tragedies of the Last Age." Two years later, in the essay in which Dryden first advanced his more Aristotelian view of tragedy, he wrote:

If Shakespeare were stripped of all the bombasts in his passions, and dressed in the most vulgar words, we should find the beauties of his thoughts remaining.<sup>63</sup>

Sublimity, he indicates, lies deeper than the arrangement of words, but he did not relate the sublime to the function of tragedy as did John Dennis in the early years of the eighteenth century.

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<sup>61</sup>Monk, pp. 32f.

<sup>62</sup>Hoyt Trowbridge, "Joseph Warton on Imagination," MP, XXXV (1937), p. 82.

<sup>63</sup>Dryden, Dramatic Essays, Rhys, p. 144.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE SOURCES OF PLEASURE IN TRAGEDY IN EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY CRITICISM

##### Empirical Theories

##### John Dennis' dramatic criticism (1693-1712)

Throughout Dryden's critical works there is the constant demand that literature please. He found a stern pleasure in the moral lesson that was brought about by fear, but he evidently did not consider fear itself a source of pleasure. Most of the writers of the eighteenth century did, however, and the question of why and how pleasure is derived from the representation of unpleasant originals was discussed by many writers. The first eighteenth century Englishman to attack the problem was John Dennis.

For Dennis, pleasure was a rapture quite distant from Dryden's cerebral delight. It was rooted in passion. "Nothing but Passion can please us," he says, "Happiness...is owing to Passion, and not to Reason."<sup>64</sup> This emphasis on passion results in Dennis' concentrating upon terror far more than he does upon compassion. "Terror" and "compassion" are the words through which Dennis interprets the tragic function, and, as Herrick observes, Dennis never forgets that the raising

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<sup>64</sup> John Dennis, Critical Works, ed. E. N. Hooker (Baltimore, 1939), I, 150. Cf. Wasserman, p. 289.

of these emotions was Aristotle's "ultimate demand upon tragedy."<sup>65</sup> For him, they are the only emotions in katharsis.<sup>66</sup> Perhaps Dennis' refusal to exclude terror from the tragic formula had something to do with his interest in searching out the source of the pleasure that is derived from unpleasant originals. As Burke's editor, J. T. Boulton, observes, "terror had never before received such critical attention as Dennis gives to it."<sup>67</sup>

In explaining the pleasure that is associated with pain, Dennis says:

No Passion is attended with greater Joy than Enthusiastic Terror, which proceeds from our reflection that we are out of danger at the very time that we see it before us.<sup>68</sup>

This enthusiastic terror that gives us joy is not tragic terror only, but any terror. The pleasure is not in the safety of fiction, but proceeds from that self-love which Dennis held to be the source of all pleasure.<sup>69</sup> This doctrine, which will be met again in Addison's criticism, is derived from the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes.

Hobbes, who considered tragedy to be of the same genre as the epic,<sup>70</sup> felt that they were didactic forms created "to avert men from vice and incline them to vertuous and honorable actions."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 86

<sup>67</sup>Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, ed. J. T. Boulton (London, 1958), xlviii.

<sup>68</sup>Dennis, I, 361.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., pp. 148f.

<sup>70</sup>Thomas Hobbes, "Answer to Davenant," Spingarn, Essays, II, 55.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., pp. 54f.

Although he did not treat directly of the pleasures of tragedy, he determined whether an action was pleasant or painful by referring it to the desire for self-gratification.<sup>72</sup> In analyzing the joy of grief, he employed Lucretius' statement that

It is sweet, when on the great sea the winds  
trouble its waters, to behold from land another's deep  
distress; not that any should be afflicted, but because  
it is sweet to see from what evils you are yourself  
exempt.<sup>73</sup>

Dennis, who adhered to Hobbes' theory of pleasure, and applied the Lucretian statement to tragedy, did not consider it shameful that "man, in everything that he does, proposes Pleasure to himself."<sup>74</sup> Dennis, however, goes beyond the Lucretian interpretations, and uses it as a base for an aesthetic consideration of the way the mind functions while comprehending a work of art.<sup>75</sup> In this speculation, the Hobbesian self-love is joined by Cartesian aesthetics,<sup>76</sup> and, as a result, Dennis finds that "the Passions are seldom anywhere so pleasing, and no where so safe as they are in tragedy."<sup>77</sup>

Terror was one of the six emotions that Dennis called "enthusiastic passions," the others being joy, horror, sadness, desire, and

<sup>72</sup>Wasserman, p. 292; cf. Hathaway, pp. 674f.

<sup>73</sup>Lucretius, De Rerum Natura (trans. H. A. J. Munro, 1914), quoted by Wasserman, p. 293.

<sup>74</sup>Dennis, I, 148-49. Cf. ibid., II, cxvi, for Hooker's comment.

<sup>75</sup>Hathaway, p. 675.

<sup>76</sup>Wasserman, pp. 288f.

<sup>77</sup>Dennis, I, 150. Cf. ibid., p. 361.

admiration. He held that these were more powerful than the "vulgar passions," for "enthusiastic passions" are heightened by the joy that the mind finds in realizing its own capacity for exalted reflection.<sup>78</sup> As Monk<sup>79</sup> observes, part of the grandeur of these passions stems from the impossibility of actually realizing their source. The cause is hinted at, but not completely realized; it cannot be encompassed by reason. Terror, Dennis says, "is a Disturbance of approaching Evil."<sup>80</sup> It is distinguished from fear in that terror comes suddenly, while fear grows gradually.

Dennis associated terror and compassion with tragedy, and the "enthusiastic passion" of admiration with the epic,<sup>81</sup> for he believed that each genre has a specific purpose and aims at a specific effect.<sup>82</sup>

Nevertheless he noted that:

Ideas which produce Terror, are necessarily accompany'd with Admiration, because ev'ry thing that is terrible, is great to Him to whom it is Terrible.<sup>83</sup>

While admiration is the only "enthusiastic passion" which Dennis related to terror, it is not the only emotion so related, for astonishment and surprise are integral to it "Because ev'rything which is very Terrible is Wonderful and Astonishing." Thus "admiration" comes into the tragic formula - not to replace terror, but to be joined with "wonder" to help the "terror" of tragedy to make an "Impression which we cannot

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., p. 338. Cf. ibid., II, xciv.

<sup>79</sup>Monk, p. 51.

<sup>80</sup>Dennis, I, 356.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., p. 244.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., II, lxxix.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., I, 361. Cf. ibid., p. 143.

resist."<sup>84</sup>

Dennis, who related the enthusiastic passions to religion, explained how these passions, through tragedy, could lead to a moral instruction. It is a formula somewhat similar to the cognitive formulas of tragedy's didacticism found in Rymer and Dryden, but in Dennis the instruction is more closely related to the passions, and the causes are more carefully analyzed. He says that a religious appreciation of a Divine Providence heightens the wonderful in tragedy, for:

Tragical Incidents that appear to have most of Providence in them are always most Moving and Terrible. The Reason is plain, For all our Passions are grounded upon the Love of Ourselves; and Terror and Compassion spring from the Calamities of our Equals...The more there appears<sup>85</sup> to be of Providence in the Punishment, the more we pity.

This statement was inspired by Aristotle's comment on the effectiveness of the surprising probability. Terror is related to Providence, and a reference to self-love makes terror morally instructive. Beyond this, however, terror, by being related to Providence, derives much of its effect as an "enthusiastic passion" because the mind cannot completely comprehend the cause. It is therefore an emotion raised by what the eighteenth century called "the sublime." For the same reason, all of Dennis' "enthusiastic passions" were "sublime."<sup>86</sup>

Writing principally of terror, Dennis was the first to analyze the causes of sublimity, and the first to study its effects on psychological grounds.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p. 361.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>86</sup>Nicolson, p. 282; Monk, p. 48.

<sup>87</sup>Nicolson, p. 281.

He held that the enthusiastic passions are brought to their heights by their reference to other ideas: the same object that brings about this "sublime" reaction will stir only "vulgar passion" if there is no time for that meditation wherein the mind associates one passion with others.<sup>88</sup> This general idea was more specifically related to tragedy by Addison, who said that the observation of pain is not pleasurable if it "presses too close upon our senses," there being no time for us to realize the pleasure of our own safety.<sup>89</sup> Implicit in both statements is the recognition of the mental process of the "association of ideas."

The principal statement of the theory of association was David Hartley's Observations on Man (1749), but its importance had long been recognized. Nearly a hundred years before Hartley, Hobbes had applied the concept to criticism,<sup>90</sup> and Locke in 1700, noticing the seemingly irrational grouping of ideas, gave the phenomenon its name.<sup>91</sup> Dryden noted that "thoughts, according to Mr. Hobbes have always some connexion,"<sup>92</sup> but in the eighteenth century Hobbes' influence was limited,<sup>93</sup> and

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<sup>88</sup>Dennis, I, 338-39. Cf. Monk, p. 49.

<sup>89</sup>Joseph Addison, The Spectator, ed. Henry Morley (London, 1896), No. 418, p. 603.

<sup>90</sup>Martin Kallich, "The Association of Ideas and Critical Theory: Hobbes, Locke, and Addison," ELH, XII, No. 4 (1945), p. 291.

<sup>91</sup>Donald F. Bond, "The Neo-Classical Psychology of the Imagination," ELH, IV, No. 4 (1937), p. 262.

<sup>92</sup>Dryden, Essays, Ker, II, 249.

<sup>93</sup>Bond, p. 261, who suggests that Hobbes' influence was small because of his antagonism to the church.

Locke's theory of association came to have the greater effect upon criticism.<sup>94</sup> Neither, however, provided more than the germs of the idea that was developed by those critics who followed Dennis in speculation about the sublime.

Dennis notes that if, in the excitation of these sublime passions, "Reason is quite overcome, the Pleasure is neither long, nor sincere, nor safe."<sup>95</sup> The pleasures and benefits of self-love cannot live without reason, and perhaps this is why Dennis held that tragedy promotes virtue by reducing "to a just Mediocrity" those sublime passions "whose excesses cause their vice."<sup>96</sup> Most commentators have neglected to give adequate recognition to Dennis' remarks about the calming of these high emotions, and this is probably due to their emphasizing his somewhat surprising insistence that the essence of art lies in the moving of these strong, enthusiastic passions. But if the stirring of high emotion appears to be out of tune with neoclassical formalism, so does Dennis' katharsis, for it is homeopathic in operation:

For as the Humors in some distemper'd Body are rais'd, in order to the evacuating that which is redundant or peccant in them; so Tragedy excites Compassion and Terrour to the same end: For the Play being over, an Audience becomes serene again, and is less apt to be mov'd at the common Accidents of Life.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup>Kallich, p. 304.

<sup>95</sup>Dennis, I, 150.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., pp. 153 and 170.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., p. 33. Cf. ibid., p. 170.

Dennis uses the term "compassion," rather than "pity," but his Hobbesian reference of all pleasing emotions to self-love makes it likely, had he written of "compassion" as he did "terror," that he would have said (as Butcher does of pity), that tragic compassion is a self-regarding emotion containing a latent, but potential, fear.

A summary of the various statements seems to indicate that Dennis' view of the function of tragedy is that, in tragedy, high, interrelated passions are excited, purged, and calmed in us so that reason may stir the pleasures of self-love; this self-love then operates for our moral instruction through the reason's realization that Providence has brought calamities to our equals. Although Dennis is psychological in his analysis, he was, as Hooker<sup>98</sup> notes, primarily interested in tragedy's moral effect.

Dennis' observation about the instruction derived from the display of Providence is related to the doctrine of poetic justice. He expressed several different attitudes towards this doctrine, for while he saw that it was morally instructive for virtue to be rewarded and vice to be punished, he yet agreed that tragedy could instruct through Providence's buffeting an ordinary man who is afflicted with an involuntary fault.<sup>99</sup> Because he felt that a man of very virtuous character should not be a principal tragic figure, Dennis' position on

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<sup>98</sup>Ibid., II, 436. Cf. A. N. Williams, "John Dennis on Love as a 'Tragical Passion,'" N&Q, CCIII, No. 9 (1958), p. 396.

<sup>99</sup>Dennis, I, 20. Cf. ibid., II, 21.

poetic justice was, as Hooker<sup>100</sup> notes, closer to Aristotle than to Rymer. However, as a result of his criticism of Addison's Cato, Dennis became embroiled in a debate with Addison as to the merits of poetic justice. From this, some critics have deduced that Dennis' view was similar to Rymer's,<sup>101</sup> but Hooker points out that in essence Dennis was close to Addison who, in the heat of the argument, had called poetic justice "a ridiculous doctrine."<sup>102</sup>

Addison's criticism in the Spectator. (1711-12)

When Addison called poetic justice a "ridiculous doctrine" with "no foundation in Nature," he objected to it on the grounds that it is inimicable to the raising of pity and fear, the "two leading Passions which the more serious Parts of Poetry endeavor to stir up in us."<sup>103</sup> Addison does not make the genre distinctions that Dennis did, nor does he consider the purgation of emotions, but confines himself to the mediate end, the raising of emotion.

In describing the pleasures of this serious poetry, however, Addison, like Dennis, begins with the Lucretian principle that pleasure comes from "the Sense of our own Safety."<sup>104</sup> Nevertheless, Addison does not relate this pleasure in safety to self-love alone, for he

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<sup>100</sup>Ibid., II, lxxxviii.

<sup>101</sup>See Green, pp. 139ff.

<sup>102</sup>Addison, Spectator, No. 40, p. 66.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid., No. 418, p. 603.

<sup>104</sup>Ibid.

finds the pleasure in that safety to depend upon the sort of detachment that proceeds from fiction.

Addison notes that the pleasures of the sublime stem not so much from emotion, as from the agitation of the imagination which loves "to grasp at any thing that is too big for its Capacity."<sup>105</sup> He asserts that natural objects have more power to stir the imagination than does art, and for him the sublime lies principally in nature, and is best realized through primary visual perceptions.<sup>106</sup> He does not relate the sublime to tragedy which but leaves "a pleasing Anguish in the Mind."<sup>107</sup>

Perhaps Addison did not recognize the purgation of emotions because he habitually referred all things to the thought process. The pleasures he found in tragedy all depend upon cognition. The pleasure derived from the sense of one's own safety depends upon reflection. The pleasure of fiction demands more cognition, and the pleasure derived from the comparison of the artist's imitation with the object imitated demands a conscious intervention of the reason. Finally, while Addison and Dennis had a similar view of the nature of the instruction received from tragedy, which "teaches us to set a just value upon our own condition,"<sup>108</sup> for Dennis, this instruction is brought

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<sup>105</sup>Ibid., No. 412, p. 594.

<sup>106</sup>Monk, p. 59.

<sup>107</sup>Addison, Spectator, No. 40, p. 67.

<sup>108</sup>Ibid., No. 418, p. 603.

about through the emotions, while for Addison it is clearly due to reasoned comparison. Addison's reference of the several proper effects of tragedy to a conscious employment of the reason is connected to his preference of Locke's theory of association to that of Hobbes.

Hobbes thought of ideas as links in a chain that were held together by resemblances, time-and-place, or cause-and-effect.<sup>109</sup> Locke, on the other hand held that ideas became associated by mere chance, and felt that this random association was a hindrance to right thinking.<sup>110</sup> He conceived this association of ideas to be subjective and relativist, in that several persons might each have a different association arising from the same object.<sup>111</sup> Addison, as Kallich<sup>112</sup> points out, felt with Locke that a conscious employment of the judgment was necessary to the establishment of a proper standard of taste, and Addison further suggested that this might best be accomplished by a close study of the propriety of words and the responses which they should elicit. This would make it possible for art to come closer in its aim to teach and please properly.

When speaking of compassion, Addison suggests that there is in it something more pleasing than the stoics of the world suspect:

It is a kind of pleasing Anguish as well as generous Sympathy that knits Mankind together.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup>Kallich, p. 308.

<sup>110</sup>Ibid., p. 304.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid., p. 306.

<sup>112</sup>Ibid., pp. 309f.

<sup>113</sup>Addison, Spectator, No. 397, p. 576.

For Addison, compassion is an other-directed, altruistic emotion, the antithesis of Dennis' self-regarding pleasures, and consequently Addison had no desire to call for its purgation, for it is the sort of response that art must achieve through a conscious control of ideas. It is related, therefore, to the sentiments of the Shaftesburians.

### Neo-Platonic Theories

Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury. (1699-1710)

The principal attack upon the doctrine of self-love came from the Shaftesburians,<sup>114</sup> who held that society functioned because man had within him other-directed "social Passions, and natural Affections."<sup>115</sup> The moral theory of benevolence, described at length by Shaftesbury, was grounded upon a sense of the yet unexpressed doctrine of sympathy, and it provided "a new pattern into which to fit man's emotional response to tragedy."<sup>116</sup> In 1699 Shaftesbury, in "An Inquiry Concerning Virtue,"<sup>115</sup> attributed man's delight in tragedy to the natural act of benevolence:

We find by our-selves, that the moving of Passions in this mournful way, the engaging them in behalf of Merit and Worth, and the exerting whatever we have of social Affection, and human Sympathy, is of the highest Delight.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup>Hathaway, p. 676.

<sup>115</sup>Shaftesbury, Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times(3rd ed., 1723), I, 118.

<sup>116</sup>Wasserman, pp. 296f.

<sup>117</sup>Shaftesbury, II, 107.

For Shaftesbury, tragedy benefits mankind by instructing individuals of low degree to be content with their place in the social order, but its greater merit, he says, lies in its condemnation of self-love:

"Tis not against Death, Hazards or Toils, that Tragedy and the heroick Fable are pointed. 'Tis not mere Life which is here exalted, or has its Price enhanc'd. On the contrary, its Calamities are expos'd: The Disorders of the Passions set to view: Fortitude recommended: Honour advanc'd: the Contempt of Death plac'd as the peculiar Note of every generous and happy Soul; and the tenacious Love of Life, as the truest Character of an abject Wretch.<sup>118</sup>

Shaftesbury's influence was extensive, and here perhaps lies a part of the reason that those "abject wretches," Hobbes and Dennis, had so little influence upon the criticism of the century.

After exposure to Dennis, it almost seems as though Shaftesbury calls for the purgation of emotions without the excitation of any emotion, but this is misleading, for as Monk observes, Shaftesbury valued enthusiasm and "reinforced the cause of emotionalism in art and life."<sup>119</sup> The benevolent sympathy which tragedy intensified by a display of "Fears, Horrors, Sorrows, Grievs,"<sup>120</sup> is not, it must be noted, so objective as is compassion, for sympathy is not only emotion, but a means to emotion as well.

Shaftesbury's is not a fully developed theory of tragedy (he considers tragedy and epic poetry to be of the same genre), but his doctrine of sympathy had an effect on tragic theory until the end of the century.

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<sup>118</sup>Ibid., I, 317-18. Cf. ibid., p. 121.

<sup>119</sup>Monk, p. 59.

<sup>120</sup>Shaftesbury, II, 106.

Francis Hutcheson (1725), and Mark Akenside. (1744).

Like Shaftesbury, his two chief disciples, Francis Hutcheson and Mark Akenside spoke out against the Hobbesian psychology, and grounded the pleasure that comes from tragedy on the benevolent natural affections. All three considered tragedy and epic as one art form whose function is to promote virtue. It is interesting to note that Akenside, who follows Addison in several areas, does not relate tragedy to the pleasures of the sublime, for he connects utility and virtue (qualities of art), with the "beautiful," while the "sublime" is, as for Addison, related to nature, and magnitude.<sup>121</sup>

In both Hutcheson and Akenside benevolence is blended with a consideration of association psychology, and they follow Locke and Addison in expressing distrust for the unregulated, subjective flow of ideas.<sup>122</sup> This is stated clearly by Hutcheson who says that an object which would normally please may at times become disagreeable by its association with an unpleasant idea, but that the resulting error of taste can be corrected by disassociation of the naturally pleasant object from the disagreeable idea.<sup>123</sup> This suggests something of the fate of "tragic fear." Unlike Dennis and Hobbes, the Shaftesburians received no pleasure from the passion of terror; tragedy pleased them because it stirred their compassion. Perhaps their

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<sup>121</sup>Monk, p. 72.

<sup>122</sup>Kallich, p. 305.

<sup>123</sup>Francis Hutcheson, An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue (London, 1726), pp. 258ff. Cf. Marjorie Grene, "Gerard's Essay on Taste," MP, XLI (1943), pp. 51f.

disassociation of terror from tragedy was a conscious and positive effort to direct "taste" to the proper appreciation of the benevolent emotion of pity.

That compassion from which the pleasure of tragedy springs is analyzed at some length by Hutcheson:

We are excited directly to desire the Relief of the Miserable: ... And if we see this impossible, we may by Reflection discern it to be vain for us to indulge our Compassion any further; and... /we/ retire from the Object which occasions our Pain, and ... endeavor to divert our Thoughts. But where there is no such Reflection, People are hurry'd by a natural, kind Instinct, to see Objects of Compassion.... This same Principle leads men to Tragedys; only we are to observe, that another strong reason of this, is the moral Beauty of the Characters and Actions which we love to behold.<sup>124</sup>

The pleasure of compassion springs from the hope that we may relieve the afflicted. If we reflect that we cannot hope to help, pleasure ceases, and pain remains. When there is no such reflection, an instinctive benevolence stirs our compassion. The fictional nature of tragedy excludes any reflection that we cannot render aid to the afflicted, and so our natural instinct for compassion leads us to pleasure.

It should be noted that, although Hutcheson develops the psychological grounds for Shaftesbury's benevolent response, he does not explain the function of this instinct through a sympathy which seeks the sufferer's feelings, but through a compassion which seeks to aid the sufferer.

Hutcheson's reference to the "moral beauty of the characters and actions" recalls the Renaissance idea that tragedy is pleasingly instructive through our admiration of the moral vigor of the tragic

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<sup>124</sup>Hutcheson, pp. 238f.

sufferer. And so for Hutcheson admiration joins compassion as a tragic emotion.<sup>125</sup>

For Hutcheson the painful passions produce "a reflex pleasure of self-approval."<sup>126</sup> This self judgment implies that the passions and the moral sense are separate entities, and so reflects the Cartesian vision of a soul whose interior emotions may be directly contrary to the passions. Hutcheson does not apply this theory to tragedy, but Wasserman<sup>127</sup> suggests that Akenside uses it to reconcile to Shaftesburian benevolence the current theory of the Abbé Du Bos (1719) that tragedy delights because the motion of any passion is more pleasant than vacuity.<sup>128</sup> Thus for Akenside:

the hand

Of Virtue mingles in the bitter tide  
 Of passion swelling with distress and pain,  
 To mitigate the sharp with gracious drops  
 Of cordial pleasure.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>125</sup>Walter John Hipple, Jr., The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory (Carbondale, Ill., 1957), p. 328n, says "Hutcheson rather mars his analysis by adducing admiration of providence as one of the emotions of tragedy; pity is felt only if suffering is disproportionate to transgression - and if disproportionate, why admire providence?" Hipple may be marring Hutcheson by a lack of philological charity, for all that is needed to put Hutcheson back on a logical footing is to point out that in the early eighteenth century "wonder" and "awe" were often integral to the meaning of "admiration." Hutcheson's statement may be related to Dennis' analysis of the effect in tragedy of the surprising probability which leads to an awe of Providence. Cf. supra, p. 21 and Dennis, I, 361.

<sup>126</sup>Hipple, p. 34.

<sup>127</sup>Wasserman, pp. 290f.

<sup>128</sup>Hathaway, p. 679.

<sup>129</sup>Mark Akenside, "The Pleasures of the Imagination," II, ll. 679-83, The Poetical Works of Akenside and Beattie (Boston, 1864), p. 163.

The movement of any passion is pleasant if the spirit is conscious  
of its own inner virtue.<sup>130</sup>

The Shaftesburians' view of tragedy is essentially the same as that advanced in the Renaissance by Sir Philip Sidney, and taken up by Dryden in his early works. They view tragedy and epic poetry as one art form whose aim is the advancement of virtue through the stimulation of the instructive emotions of commiseration and admiration. The emotion of fear does not fit in with their conception of tragedy's function. As pity, or compassion, and admiration are desirable qualities raised by tragedy, they do not seek the purgation of these emotions. What the Shaftesburians bring to this estimate is an explanation of why tragedy is pleasing. The Renaissance said that it pleased because it instructed; the Shaftesburians held that it pleased through bringing into play man's natural and benevolent instinct for sympathy and compassion, a stimulation that was at once pleasing and beneficial to man. Earlier theories had required the conscious intervention of the reason for the realization of tragedy's aim to delight and benefit mankind;<sup>131</sup> the Shaftesburians' act of sympathy was intuitional and emotional.

These men of benevolence were adamant in their denunciation of the Hobbesian doctrine of self-love,<sup>132</sup> and no doubt this had an adverse effect upon Dennis' popularity. Dennis was both the first and last to

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<sup>130</sup>Wasserman, p. 291, who suggests that Edward Young also based his notes on the pleasures of tragedy upon this Cartesian concept.

<sup>131</sup>Wasserman, p. 301.

<sup>132</sup>Hathaway ignores the Shaftesburians when he says (p. 681) that those early eighteenth century writers who reject the self-love explanation of pleasure fall back upon Aristotle.

relate the rising concepts of the sublime to a complete katharsis statement. No major eighteenth century critic after Dennis, advanced a complete theory of emotional purgation, and, as with the Shaftesburians, the excitation of emotion continued to be tragedy's principal function. With Addison the concept of the sublime had been applied more to nature than to art, and the connection between tragedy and the sublime grew more tenuous during the second half of the century.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE DISINTEGRATION OF ARISTOTLE'S THEORY OF TRAGEDY

Numerous elements were brought to the support of the eighteenth century's explanations of the function of tragedy. All of the basic positions had been advanced by 1750, and the rest of the century but altered the ingredients to (quite literally) suit their "taste".<sup>133</sup> This chapter, then, will deal with the treatises of men concerned with the aesthetics of taste (Hume, Burke, Gerard, and Kames), and will conclude with a brief inspection of the practical criticism of Samuel Johnson.

Several theories by which the pleasures of tragedy could be explained were available to the critics of the period. From the Renaissance had come the ideas that tragedy pleases by its ethical function, and by our delight in the artist's skill, but by the middle of the eighteenth century these had been largely replaced by three other concepts of pleasure: the Hobbesian theory of self-love, the doctrine of sympathy, and Fontenelle's elaboration of the Du Bos proposition.<sup>134</sup> The question of how tragedy should please was susceptible to more speculation than the question of how it should

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<sup>133</sup>Hathaway, p. 682.

<sup>134</sup>A. O. Aldridge, "The Pleasures of Pity," ELH, XVI, No. 1 (1949), p. 76. See also Wasserman, pp. 295f.

instruct, and the only important critic in the entire century to challenge the dogma that it should be morally instructive as well as pleasing, was David Hume.

#### Hume's Theory of Tragedy

Hume, writing in 1742, "Of the Standard of Taste" said that every work of art has a certain end or purpose, and that:

The object of eloquence is to persuade, of history to instruct, of poetry to please by means of the passions and the imagination.<sup>135</sup>

He based his theory of how tragedy pleased upon Fontenelle's modification of Du Bos' assertion that any passion is better than vacuity. Fontenelle had suggested that while pleasure and pain are greatly different, their cause may be the same, and that anything--such as the fiction of a tragedy--that causes the diminution of the one allows the precedence of the other. To this, Hume added that if two passions are experienced at the same time, the dominant passion will absorb the subordinate one, and will receive additional impetus from it. And thus Hume concludes that if the pain of tragedy does not outweigh the pleasure we find in artistry, the pain will cause our delight to increase.<sup>136</sup>

Hume's theory of tragic pleasure differs from the sympathy and self-love theories, for it distinguishes, as they do not, between

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<sup>135</sup>David Hume, Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary (London 1898), I, 277.

<sup>136</sup>Ibid., pp. 259-61.

life and art. Hipple<sup>137</sup> suggests that Hume, who had done much to advance the doctrine of sympathy, could not base a theory of pleasure upon that doctrine because he did not agree that all sympathy is pleasurable: "Were it so, An Hospital would be a more entertaining Place than a Ball."<sup>138</sup>

Although the pleasures of tragedy are for Hume based upon fiction, sympathy nevertheless plays a part in his view of tragedy's operation, and can be seen to contribute to that sense of a homeopathic katharsis that Herrick<sup>139</sup> has noted in Hume's remarks about the manner in which a well written tragedy affects an audience:

They are pleased in proportion as they are afflicted, and never are so happy as when they employ tears, sobs, and crys to give vent to their sorrow, and relieve their heart, swollen with the tenderest sympathy and compassion.<sup>140</sup>

The heart is relieved because, through an art of sympathy, it takes on a feeling of that which gives rise to sorrow. The delight in tragedy increases as sympathy for the sufferer increases, and this brings a relief, or purgation, of sorrows. The sympathy itself is not pleasant, but the emotions it allows the viewer to realize are converted to pleasure through the delight in the artistry that gave rise to the emotions.

The response to tragedy is emotional, and not instructive, for to Hume sympathy was not necessarily benevolent;<sup>141</sup> it was but the

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<sup>137</sup>Hipple, p. 50.

<sup>138</sup>Hume, in a letter to Adam Smith, 1759, quoted by Wasserman, p. 295.

<sup>139</sup>Herrick, p. 120.

<sup>140</sup>Hume, Essays, I, 258.

<sup>141</sup>Hipple, p. 321.

agent through which moral feelings are generally realized.<sup>142</sup>

This emotional response to tragedy is what might have been expected from those who wrote at length of sympathy, but they did not forward this view, for they related sympathy to morality, and both to pleasure. Shaftesbury had thought of sympathy as a natural, moral instinct that was a means of reaching the feelings of others, but Hutcheson had related this instinct to a compassion which seeks to act for the relief of the afflicted. Hume, although he spoke of tragedy stirring compassion as well as sympathy, realized that "compassion runs always counter to sympathy".<sup>143</sup> Sympathy, as George Campbell later said, is "that quality of the soul which renders it susceptible of almost any passion, by communication from the bosom of another."<sup>144</sup> Just as the Lucretian safety and self-love rests upon a comparison that is opposed to sympathetic identification, so does compassion rest on comparison, for it is objective, and not self-regarding. Hume, however, was the only early advocate of sympathy to recognize this distinction. For the others, sympathy was not a means of identification, but a mode of feeling. Most writers identified sympathy with compassion; for them it was a pleasing and morally beneficial instinct, and they held that works of art that stirred this impulse were therefore beneficial to mankind.

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<sup>142</sup>Walter Jackson Bate, "The Sympathetic Imagination in Eighteenth-Century English Criticism", ELH, XII, No. 2 (1945), p. 146.

<sup>143</sup>Hipple, p. 50.

<sup>144</sup>George Campbell, quoted by Wasserman, p. 297.

Hume's was the last theory in the century to introduce any new element-- that of the impetus given to the dominant passion by the subordinate passion. It had little influence, however, and was generally repeated only in the objections raised by the theorists of sympathy,<sup>145</sup> who attacked Hume's demand for fiction rather than his hint that sympathy was not entirely compatible with compassion.

### The School of Sympathy

Of the many treatises that dealt with the problem of the pleasure that is derived from pain, the most popular was Edmund Burke's A Philosophical Enquiry in to the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, which was first published in 1757. In this work Burke set forth the idea that the sublime experience is always rooted in terror. Monk has said that the epitome of Burke's idea of the sublime is that "terror fills the mind with great ideas, and soul delights in the experience."<sup>146</sup> The more terrifying the experience, the greater is the pleasure received, and it is on this basis that Burke objects to Hume's tragic theory, saying,

We shall be much mistaken if we attribute any considerable part of our satisfaction in tragedy to a consideration that tragedy is a deceit, and its representations no realities. The nearer it approaches the reality, and the further it removes us from all idea of fiction, the more perfect is its power.<sup>147</sup>

Although Burke finds more pleasure in reality than he does in fiction, he insists "that it is absolutely necessary my life should be out of

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<sup>145</sup> Wasserman, p. 295.

<sup>146</sup> Monk, p. 87.

<sup>147</sup> Burke, p. 47

any imminent hazard before I can take delight in the suffering of others, real or imaginary."<sup>148</sup> This is Hobbesian, but for Burke, safety is not the source of pleasure, but rather a condition requisite to the pleasures that come from the stirring of our emotions, and from our desire to relieve those who suffer.<sup>149</sup> As Wasserman<sup>150</sup> notes, two sets of passions are at work: (1) the selfish passion that delights in its own movement (an echo of Du Bos), and (2) the social passion that seeks to relieve others (an idea derived directly from Hutcheson). Elaborating a Shaftesburian concept, Burke found real tragedy to be more satisfactory than imitation, for he held that our social instincts are designed to accomplish real, not aesthetic ends.

Alexander Gerard's An Essay on Taste was published in 1759, only two years after Burke's Enquiry, but, although it deals with many of the same problems, it was evidently written without any knowledge of Burke's work.<sup>151</sup> For Gerard, sublimity is the result of the mind's attempting to expand itself to the point where it can comprehend and identify with an inspiring object,<sup>152</sup> and the passion of terror is sublime, for it "always implies astonishment, occupies the whole soul, and suspends all its motions."<sup>153</sup> Gerard, however, does

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<sup>148</sup>Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>149</sup>Burke, p. 46.

<sup>150</sup>Wasserman, p. 298.

<sup>151</sup>Monk, p. 109.

<sup>152</sup>Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>153</sup>Alexander Gerard, An Essay on Taste, quoted by Monk, p. 111.

not relate this terror to tragedy, and from the tone of his discourse, it seems that he did not consider terror as an emotion proper to tragedy. His general position was that anything in the arts that is sublime is so entirely through the association of ideas.<sup>154</sup> Although he was of the school of sympathy, Gerard held that a delight in the associative process of imitation is the principal source of the pleasure in tragedy, and that sympathy but contributes to that delight.<sup>155</sup>

Although there is little relationship between the specific opinions of Burke and Gerard, they both hold that terror is sublime, and that it is much more at home in the realm of nature than it is in tragedy. Both find compassion for the afflicted to be a source of pleasure, and feel it is a proper element of tragedy, despite their reservations about its effectiveness.

Henry Home, Lord Kames, had no misgivings about the effectiveness of compassion in any form, and he emphasized it almost as much as Hutcheson had.<sup>156</sup> The benevolence that produces compassion is, for Kames, the source of the pleasure that comes from unpleasant originals.<sup>157</sup> Like Burke, Kames follows Hutcheson in saying that compassion desires to relieve suffering, and this benevolent instinct applies to suffering or to the artistic imitation of suffering.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>154</sup>Monk, p. 112.

<sup>155</sup>Hipple, pp. 76 f. Cf. Wasserman, p. 30ln.

<sup>156</sup>Aldridge, p. 82. See also Hipple, p. 33 for an account of Hutcheson's influence on Kames.

<sup>157</sup>Henry Holm, Lord Kames, Elements of Criticism, ed. J. R. Boyd (New York, 1883), p. 235.

<sup>158</sup>Ibid., p. 448.

Like so many of the period, Kames did not make a genre distinction between tragedy and the epic, and said:

Tragedy differs not from the epic in substance: in both the same ends are pursued, namely instruction and amusement.<sup>159</sup>

Nevertheless, Kames held that some subjects are more effectively treated in one form than in the other. "Heroism, magnanimity, undaunted courage, and other elevated virtues," are best suited for the epic, because it best portrays "grand and heroic actions." Tragedy, he said, best displays "tender passion, and the whole tribe of sympathetic affections."<sup>160</sup> Tragedy was the natural home of compassion, and Kames felt that tragedy makes a deeper impression than does the epic.<sup>161</sup> Because "undaunted courage" is that which combats fear, it may be that Kames felt that fear is more suited to the epic than to tragedy, the home of "tender passion."

For Kames, tragedy and the epic were forms, not genres. When he did make a genre distinction, it was between the "pathetic" story and the "moral" story, and these could exist in either the dramatic or epic form.<sup>162</sup> Kames' "moral composition" contains most of the elements of Aristotelian tragedy. It elicits both compassion and fear, but Kames avoids mentioning the purgation of these emotions.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>159</sup>Ibid., p. 445.

<sup>160</sup>Ibid., p. 447.

<sup>161</sup>Ibid., p. 445.

<sup>162</sup>Ibid.

<sup>163</sup>Helen Whitcomb Randall, The Critical Theory of Lord Kames ("Smith College Studies in Modern Languages," Vol. XXII, Nos. 1-4; Northampton, Mass., 1941), p. 53.

Instead, the fear that is aroused in us teaches us to avoid those faults which have brought suffering to the protagonist.<sup>164</sup> This genre "not only improves the heart, ...but instructs the head by the moral it contains."<sup>165</sup> The "pathetic" composition, however does not propose to teach a moral truth, and so it does not seek to raise fear or terror.

A pathetic composition, whether epic or dramatic, tends to a habit of virtue by exciting us to do what is right, and restraining us from what is wrong. Its frequent pictures of human woes produce, besides, two effects extremely salutary: they improve our sympathy and fortify us to bear our own misfortunes.<sup>166</sup>

The object of Kames' "pathetic" story is to improve the heart through stirring compassion, and as Kames describes it, it contains elements essential to that which became known as "sentimental tragedy."

The theorists of sympathy had begun to realize that they had long been writing about a genre that did not exist; one whose end was to exercise and strengthen the spectator's faculty for sympathy. When they fully realized this, they either said with Kames that there were two types of tragedy, or, like Hugh Blair and George Campbell, they rejected fear from the tragic formula, holding that fear dissipates the pleasure of their instinctive pity.<sup>167</sup>

#### Samuel Johnson's Comment

Samuel Johnson dismissed the long-lived notion that pity is instinctive with the observation that since children and savages are

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<sup>164</sup>Kames, p. 448.

<sup>165</sup>Ibid., p. 446.

<sup>166</sup>Ibid.

<sup>167</sup>Wasserman, pp. 304f.

cruel, pity is not natural, but "is acquired and improved by the cultivation of reason."<sup>168</sup> His insistence on reason is reflected in his explanation of katharsis. When asked how the passions may be purged by pity and fear, he answered:

Why, Sir, you are to consider what is the meaning of purging in the original sense. It is to expel impurities from the human body. The mind is subject to the same imperfection. The passions are the great movers of human actions; but they are mixed with such impurities, that it is necessary they should be purged or refined by means of terror and pity. For instance, ambition is a noble passion; but by seeing, upon the stage, that a man who is so excessively ambitious as to raise himself by injustice is punished, we are terrified at the fatal consequences of such a passion. In the same manner a certain degree of resentment is necessary; but if we see that a man carries it too far, we pity the object of it, and are taught to moderate that passion.<sup>169</sup>

Although Johnson starts with the homeopathic analogy, he reasons his way to a moral conclusion, similar to that of Kames. He quickly reduces both pity and fear to agents through which tragedy instructs. That which was instructive to Johnson was also pleasurable,<sup>170</sup> and he therefore did not feel the need to rationalize his acceptance of the neo-Horatian precept that art should both please and delight.

#### Summary

The concept of the sublime and the doctrine of sympathy began to influence English men of letters at about the same time. After

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<sup>168</sup>Samuel Johnson, in Boswell's Life of Johnson, quoted by Aldridge, p. 81.

<sup>169</sup>Johnson, Boswell's Life, quoted by Herrick, p. 130.

<sup>170</sup>Jean H. Hagstrum, Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism (Minneapolis, Minn., 1952), p. 82.

Dennis and Addison, the sublime emotions became more closely related to nature than to art, while the school of sympathy dealt with morality and benevolence, and applied them to art.

In the second half of the century, those who wrote the most of the sublime were the aestheticians who adhered to the doctrine of sympathy. The sublime was the area of self-regarding passions, of elevated passions, and of terror, while sympathy provided a home for altruism, tender passions, and pity. Recalling Kames' division of the epic and tragic forms, and the qualities residing in each,<sup>171</sup> the analogy might be drawn that the epic had become associated with the sublime, as tragedy had with sympathy. Critics arguing the case for heroic villains had asserted that the sublime has nothing to do with morality.<sup>172</sup>

Hume, by acknowledging a purgation that rested on the sympathetic imagination, had opened the door to the homeopathic interpretation of katharsis. He had hinted that sympathy "runs counter" to the altruistic emotion of compassion, but he was not heeded. The theorists of sympathy held that compassion is a moral instinct, and they insisted on linking tragedy to compassion rather than to any of the self-regarding emotions. Although they were willing enough to consider the pleasures of terror and other self-regarding emotions in the amoral sublime, they would not affiliate that terror with tragedy,

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<sup>171</sup>Supra, p. 43.

<sup>172</sup>Marlies K. Danziger, "Heroic Villains in Eighteenth-Century Criticism," Comparative Literature, XI (1959), p. 39.

and this resulted in their discarding elements basic to Aristotle's theory of tragedy. Compassion was pleasing, and it was morally beneficial. These were the qualities that Sir Philip Sidney had demanded of art.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Twice during the eighteenth century critics approached a homeopathic interpretation of Aristotle's katharsis clause, but these interpretations were ignored or rejected, for the majority of writers adhered to a more obviously moral view of tragedy's proper function.

To Aristotle's "pity and fear," writers of the Renaissance had added "admiration" as an emotion properly raised by tragedy, and finally, this "admiration" replaced "fear" in the formula. The inclusion of this morally instructive emotion caused writers to ignore Aristotle's statement that these emotions should be purged. When Dryden and Dennis discarded "admiration" from the formula, they were able to consider purgation. For Dryden, tragedy's purgation acted upon the will, and the elements purged were different from the emotions raised. Dennis, however, wrote of a katharsis that acts upon the emotions, a katharsis which is instructive only when the reason, in retrospect, considers the power of Providence. Dennis' katharsis was homeopathic in essence: the emotions raised and purged were self-regarding terror, and (by implication also self-regarding) pity. Because Dennis' interpretation of the function of tragedy rested upon

the Hobbesian doctrine of self-love, his view was opposed or ignored by most of his contemporaries.

The principal opponents of the self-love philosophy, the Shaftesburians, felt tragedy was beneficial because it stirred men's benevolent instinct for compassion. Taking Aristotle's pity to mean not self-regarding pity, but other-directed compassion, they ignored his demand for purgation. Meanwhile, Hutcheson, studying the possibilities of the psychology of association, set forth grounds for the disassociation of the unpleasant emotion of fear from the benevolent emotion of compassion.

In the middle of the century, David Hume hinted at a homeopathic theory of katharsis, but as it ran counter to the raising of compassion, it was ignored, as was his suggestion that sympathy, which unites, and compassion, which separates the observer and the object, could not exist simultaneously. The inheritors of the Shaftesburian tradition, the theorists of "sympathy," still looked at tragedy as an instrument for the arousing of the benevolent, other-directed instinct of compassion. These same moral philosophers, when writing of the "sublime," speculated about subjective emotions, psychological relationships, physiological responses, and sympathetic identification. They wrote about Shakespeare's ability to identify with the characters he created, but they did not write of the audience's sympathetic identification with the tragic sufferers. They wrote of a sort of empathic identification between the observer and the natural object observed, but they wrote not of an audience's identification with a

character of tragedy, but of the audience's compassion for the sufferer. They wrote of the mind's attempt to comprehend itself, but they did not define tragic pity as a self-regarding emotion. Finally, following Hutcheson's suggestion, they found fear incompatible with compassion and consciously excluded it from their new statements of the tragic formula. Thus, they established a new genre: the sentimental tragedy. Fear had been discarded by the very aestheticians who were tracing the phenomenon of pleasure from pain to its physiological and psychological causes. Apparently these aestheticians felt that art stood apart from other experience: that art must work for man's moral betterment. Hume, who set forth his theory of identification, and self-regarding emotion, had said that the function of poetry is but to please. All of the other major critics of the century, however, adhered to the neo-Horatian ideal that art must both please and instruct.

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