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JOHNSON'S TRAGEDY OF HUMAN WISHES

In the study of eighteenth-century literature, where a great deal of careful scholarship buttresses the interpretive readings of many works, such a thing as a personal reading may seem a presumptuous idea at best. When the personal reading is at odds with that of responsible critics, as my reading of Johnson's *The Vanity of Human Wishes* is with the judgments of men like Donald Greene and Louis Bredvold, there may be even more room for doubt. But Johnson demonstrated the value of personal criticism, and though his personal reactions were almost always sound they were also impressionistic and occasionally idiosyncratic. His reaction to the deaths of Cordelia and Desdemona, or his judgments on metaphysical poetry or *Lycidas* are not aberrations, but examples of the method's straightforwardness. The key is that Johnson is honest with his own reactions to a work; no critic, whether Aristotle or Thomas Rymer, can convince him he feels something he does not, or conversely, that he does not feel something when he knows he does.

What I feel in reading this poem is indicated by my title: 'The Tragedy of Human Wishes'. I come away from it each time not with a sense merely of the 'courage and Christian resolution' which Bredvold finds there, but rather a sense of pathos, of sorrow and disappointment's inevitability, of *tragic loss*.¹ I am not the only reader to have such a reaction to the poem; Mary Lascelles, for example, is convinced that *The Vanity of Human Wishes* is Johnson's attempt to vindicate himself as a tragic poet after the comparative failure of *Irene*.² But Donald Greene has argued that to read the poem in this way is to 'miss the point of it'; that anyone who finds the poem gloomy and pessimistic is incapable of understanding 'the central teaching of the Christian ethic' which Johnson is trying to convey in it.³ He is forced to concede that the concluding twenty-six lines of Christian sentiment seem a bit short by comparison with the preceding 342 which detail most conceivable human miseries, but he still argues that they are delivered with 'convincing finality' and are 'simple and unarguable'.⁴ I will return to argue with them, nevertheless, later, but first I would like to find some reasons in the content and form of the poem which may help to justify my reading.

Harking back to Renaissance and medieval models, *The Vanity of Human*

¹ Louis I. Bredvold, *The Literature of the Restoration and the Eighteenth Century*, Vol. III in *A History of English Literature*, ed. Hardin Craig (New York, 1962), p. 30.

² Mary Lascelles, 'Johnson and Juvenal', in *New Light on Dr. Johnson: Essays on the Occasion of his 250th Birthday*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles (New Haven, 1959), p. 35.

³ Donald Greene, *Samuel Johnson* (New York, 1970), p. 56.

⁴ Greene, p. 57. Greene concedes that 'the first part of the poem is a detailed picture of a Waste Land', in 'Augustinianism and Empiricism: A Note on Eighteenth-Century English Intellectual History', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 1 (1967), 64.

Wishes awakens an older and simpler conception of tragic form: *de casibus virorum illustrium* — the fall of exalted men and the burden of Chaucer's Monk's Tale. Johnson takes pains to bring the metaphor of Fortune's wheel into his poem:

Unnumber'd supplicants croud Preferment's gate,
Athirst for wealth, and burning to be great;
Delusive Fortune hears th' incessant call,
They mount, they shine, evaporate, and fall. (73-76)⁵

Yet Wolsey, Charles XII, Laud and the rest are not suffering merely another turn of Fortune's wheel, for if that were the case, then stoicism would be the only possible way to reconcile oneself with the world. The *de casibus* theme merely emphasizes the fall as a chance event one may expect from fate, while Johnson's poem makes clear that the goal of ambition contains tragic consequences in itself. The blind forces of destiny and chance invoked in the medieval conception of tragedy are not as affecting, in human terms, as Johnson's view of the inevitability of his characters' fall as soon as they aspire. Their fates are built into their aspirations, and Johnson explores the reasons for this at some length. One reason is the fickleness which characterizes both public and royal favor: Johnson scornfully describes the changeable emotions of the mob toward the portrait of a great man after his fall (83-90) and then remarks how quickly a sovereign's smile can turn to frowns (109-12). There is the suggestion that ambition carries its own doom:

What gave great Villiers to th' assassin's knife,
And fixed disease on Harley's closing life?
What murder'd Wentworth, and what exil'd Hyde,
By kings protected, and to kings ally'd?
What but their wish indulg'd in courts to shine,
And pow'r too great to keep, or to resign? (129-34)

But Johnson's concept of ambition and power is more complex than this. Those who seek power, whether it be that of government or of learning, are not monsters of ambition — they represent the norm of human aspiration. There is no folly involved in seeking to distinguish oneself; there is not even any choice involved in it — it is characteristic of human beings. A possible objection here is that Johnson, like Juvenal, continually compares these men to those who control their aspirations and do not struggle for great wealth, fame, learning, or power. It is true that Johnson agrees with Juvenal that *rarus venit in cenacula miles* (18),⁶ but he finds other difficulties with the garret, not the least of which is that a man does not *choose* to be there rather than in, say, a gracious house at

⁵ Quotations and line numbers refer to the text reproduced in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, Vol. VI, *Poems*, ed. E. L. McAdam, Jr., with George Milne (New Haven and London, 1964), pp. 91-109.

⁶ Quotations and verse numbers from Juvenal's tenth satire refer to the text reproduced in *Juvenal and Persius*, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann; Cambridge, Mass., 1957), pp. 192-221.

Twickenham. The consolations of the poor are those negative ones which Johnson later was to deride so forcefully in his review of Soame Jenyns's *A Free Enquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil*: the poor are secure from envious malice and from the rich man's constant fears that his money will be stolen. Johnson's 'How much more safe the vassal than the lord' (32) comes from Juvenal's much more specific comment that you won't find poison in your earthenware cup; *nulla aconita bibuntur/[f]ictilibus* (25-6). But the traveller who walks the heath secure and gay because he has no worries about money is still 'needy', and the ease with which his security can be shattered by wealth is testimony to the material and spiritual aspirations common to all. The effect of stories such as Wolsey's and Charles's is that they do not come off as cautionary examples, but rather as illustrations of what problems we are all heirs to, in one degree or another, as human beings. D. V. Boyd points this out: 'The mere act of survival, of maintaining one's existence, demands a considerable, even an heroic, act of will, and all the pettiness and pride which the satirist normally seeks to condemn may therefore come to be seen, if not as admirable, at least as wholly natural'.⁷

Here are stories of the fall of exalted men, but men whose aspirations are presented in terms of our common humanity — men with whom we can identify. Aristotle's description of the tragic hero includes these two features: the exalted state of the hero and his basically sympathetic nature (he is neither so bad as to seem a monster nor so good as to be equally remote from the experience of those who watch his actions). But Aristotle was describing a dramatic form, and tragedy specifically. It is a serious objection to this reading that the poem is subtitled an imitation of the tenth *satire* of Juvenal.⁸ Surely Johnson respected the integrity of forms enough not to confuse satire and tragedy?

Maynard Mack made a detailed comparison of the two forms in his article, 'The Muse of Satire'. Some of his remarks seem applicable to *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. Amid what Mack self-deprecatingly refers to as 'one or two rhetorical observations' about satire he writes:

Tragedy and satire, I suspect, are two ends of a literary spectrum. Tragedy tends to exhibit the inadequacy of norms, to dissolve systematized values, to precipitate a meaning containing — but not necessarily contained by — recognizable ethical codes. Satire, on the contrary, asserts the validity and necessity of norms, systematic values, and meanings that *are* contained by recognizable codes. Where tragedy fortifies the sense of irrationality and complexity in experience because it presents us a world in which man is more victim than agent, in which our commodities prove to be our defects (and vice versa), and in which blindness and madness are likely to be symbols of insight, satire tends to fortify our feeling that life makes more immediate moral sense. In the world it offers

⁷ 'Vanity and Vacuity: A Reading of Johnson's Verse Satires', *ELH*, 39 (1972), 389.

⁸ Much of the argument here concerns the question whether the poem satisfies Johnson's own definition of satire as a work 'in which wickedness or folly is censured'. The name in any case is not necessarily significant; Horace called his satires epistles and discourses or talks (*epistolae* and *sermones*), Pope called his essays, and Swift apparently thought his ought to be called libels, according to a letter from Pope to Swift, April 20, 1733 in *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, ed. George Sherburn (Oxford, 1956), III, 366. Ian Jack also quotes this letter in *Augustan Satire*, p. 100.

us, madness and blindness are usually the emblems of vice and folly, evil and good are clearly distinguishable, criminals and fools are invariably responsible (therefore censurable), and standards of judgement are indubitable. All this, too, results from a slant of the glass, a fictional perspective on the real world — which, as we know, does not wholly correspond either with the tragic outlook or the satiric one.⁹

If indeed there is a continuous spectrum of forms between satire and tragedy, with the tragic view characterized by a sense of the 'irrationality and complexity in experience', much in *The Vanity of Human Wishes* seems to lie at the tragic end of the spectrum: the complexity of experience where apparent good, pursued as a life's goal, turns out to be dangerous, empty, corrupting, or transient; the victimization of man by his own (at least sometimes) wholesome ambitions; and a resulting world in which our commodities — power, learning, wealth — prove to be our defects.

Another objection is that we recognize affinities not just between Johnson's poem and Juvenal's, but among Juvenal's tenth satire, Rochester's *Satyr against Mankind*, and Johnson's poem. They are all similar in scope: the satiric targets include everything which demonstrates man's folly. They even begin with similar imagery: Rochester's 'Reason, an *Ignis fatuus* in the Mind' and Johnson's 'treach'rous phantoms in the mist' (9) both seem to derive from Juvenal's 'mists of error' (*erroris nebula*, 4). But consider the differences. Rochester's poem is an acerb dialogue which describes the seamy underside of generalized Man's nature; there are no particularizing examples save for extremely brief mentions of Diogenes and Sir Thomas Meres. Juvenal indeed particularizes and uses historical persons throughout, but his choices are hardly representative of human aspirations in the way Johnson's are. Sejanus and Messalina are monsters — examples of humanity only in its most depraved forms, and of course, calculated choices to bear out Juvenal's argument that mankind is practically a lost cause. *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, by contrast, seems a much stronger *a posteriori* argument in which the examples arise from British and continental history as if from the poet's direct experience, generating the total theme, which is not man's depravity but his unfortunate situation. And these characters — Wolsey, Vane, Laud, and the rest — however prodigious they may be, are not monsters. Their lives are effective magnifications of tendencies present in all of us, which makes them more real, or at least closer to our experience than Juvenal's men and women. This experiential base differentiates this poem from that of the earlier satirists, and connects it to Johnson's other work. If *Rasselas* is a philosophical fable, *The Vanity of Human Wishes* is a practical survey of the disappointments attending the human condition, illustrated with more than a dozen examples: Wolsey, Villiers, Harley, Wentworth, Hyde, Lydiat, Galileo, Laud, Charles XII, Xerxes, Charles Albert, Croesus, Marlborough, Swift, Vane, and Sedley. Another difference, and an important one, is that the voice of *The Vanity of Human Wishes* does not relish turning over this catalogue of unfortunates, while both Rochester and Juvenal

⁹ 'The Muse of Satire', *Yale Review*, 41 (1951), 85.

most assuredly do enjoy their lists of follies and misfortunes.¹⁰

The passage on the scholar (135-174) illustrates the compassionate treatment Johnson gives his theme. We may appreciate the imitation by recognizing that it is an instance of the satirist satirized, a favorite technique of Roman verse satire, but Johnson's attitude toward the 'young enthusiast' who burns with the 'fever of renown' could not differ more from Juvenal's contemptuous reference, in passing, to the schoolboy with his little satchel (114-117). Johnson's encouragement is heartfelt: 'proceed, illustrious youth,/And virtue guard thee to the throne of Truth!' He tempers this attitude with only the merest hint of irony ('Bacon's mansion trembles o'er his head'); during most of the passage his tone vacillates between avuncular warning that the dangers are widespread, even linked with mortality itself ('Nor think the doom of man revers'd for thee') and a plangent recognition of his own case, with its particular traps ('Should ... Sloth effuse her opiate fumes in vain'). It is he whom praise does not relax, who is neither tempted by novelty nor frightened by difficulty, who gains 'the last prize' which learning bestows. But there is no consolation in avoiding folly and vice; in fact, the elements of praise and blame are absent from this passage. Praise and blame, along with 'an appreciable degree of fictionality' and the middle style rather than the lofty, are other characteristics of satire cited by Maynard Mack which do not fit our model. It is not candid to read Johnson's comments on Wolsey or Charles, let alone the aspiring scholar, as assigning blame. Praise is not implied for the other terms of the various comparisons: the vassal, the needy traveller, the 'wisest justice on the banks of Trent', but rather Johnson is saying that if choice is involved, men will follow the bent of their ambition, which is not wrong but human. Those in lower conditions are not there from choice, because, as he remarks in another context, few men are granted the luxury of determining what direction their lives will take. Johnson's poem is *ethical*, to be sure, but is the ethos anything like that of Pope, for example? The significant difference I find is that Johnson's poem represents the thoughtful, even painful reflections of an individual — he does not speak from society's viewpoint or utter society's judgment on any of his characters. He feels compassion and interest in the misfortunes common to all men, but he also sees such experiences as isolating human beings from one another. Both in the viewpoint and in the subject matter there is the alienation or isolation which forms part of the tragic mode and is at odds with the cohesive, social nature of comedy, from which satire draws its force.

Mack's other two desiderata, fictionality and the middle style, will lead us into a further comparison of Johnson with Juvenal. Johnson follows the tenth satire in deriving his examples from history, and true sources *versus* made-up had always been one of the determiners of tragic form, at least since Donatus's commentary on Terence. Johnson follows Juvenal where Juvenal fits a serious purpose, but changes him where he does not. Ian Jack is wrong, for instance,

¹⁰ But Harold Love makes important distinctions between Juvenal's 'unholy relish' and Rochester's attitude, in 'Rochester and the Traditions of Satire', *Restoration Literature: Critical Approaches*, ed. Harold Love (London, 1972), p. 152.

when he implies in the last chapter of *Augustan Satire* that the serious tone of Johnson's poem comes from Juvenal.¹¹ Johnson admitted in the *Life of Dryden* that Juvenal's 'peculiarity ... is a mixture of gaiety and stateliness', but he chooses uniform stateliness for his own poem. Juvenal may be dealing with grisly subjects, but he is flippant throughout the tenth satire — much of the poem isn't even in the middle style, it is in the low style. Johnson wants a loftier one, so he never descends, as Juvenal often does, into the merely jocular. Nor does he agree with Juvenal that the only way or the best way to view human events is the comic, so he leaves out Juvenal's story of the two wise men, one of whom laughs and the other cries every time they step outside the door. Juvenal's comment indicates a preference not felt in Johnson: *mirandum est unde ille oculis suffecerit umor* (32), the wonder is where the second one's eyes could find all that moisture. The first sage was Democritus, and though Johnson follows Juvenal in invoking him, what had been his 'continual laughter' (*perpetuo risu*) in the Latin poem becomes more sardonic in the imitation: first it is 'instructive mirth' (50), but finally it turns to scorn:

Such was the scorn that fill'd the sage's mind,
Renew'd at ev'ry glance on humankind;
How just that scorn ere yet thy voice declare,
Search every state, and canvass ev'ry pray'r (69-72).

The tone Johnson is seeking dictates that he leave out passages corresponding to that in which Juvenal reports the comic exchanges in the mob which witnesses Sejanus' downfall, and that tone also makes it necessary for Johnson to bowdlerize Juvenal. One example occurs in the passage on the aged man in which Johnson musters much detail to prove that 'life protracted is protracted woe' (258), where a single line, 'And Luxury with sighs her slave resigns' (266) replaces the over-explicit verses in Juvenal (204-9) describing in clinical detail the loss of virility in the old man. Another example of the kind occurs toward the end of the poem, where both poets are describing the disadvantages of beauty. Johnson has no trouble finding English examples in Vane and Sedley, but when Juvenal enlarges on the problem of Silius, whom Claudius's wife Messalina lusted after and seduced in ill-concealed splendor (329-345), Johnson refuses to follow, though the Restoration court might have furnished him with sufficient parallels. These instances, together with the fact that the two poems are almost exactly the same length (366 lines in Juvenal; 368 in Johnson), show that there are markedly different emphases in the two writers, Johnson's deriving partly at least from the desire for seriousness and consistent elevation of tone.

All of these matters — the seriousness of tone, the historical survey of the fall of great men, the inevitability of suffering and disappointment because great power cannot be released or retained, because learning excites envy, and because worry is inseparable from wealth — all of these contribute to the tragic

¹¹ *Augustan Satire: Intention and Idiom in English Poetry 1660-1750* (Oxford, 1952), p. 147.

force of the poem. But the last lines *seem* to offer an answer. If anywhere, it is in those lines that we have to look for the assertion of 'norms, systematic values, and meanings that are contained by recognizable [ethical] codes' which Mack posits as the distinguishing characteristic of satire. I don't think those lines are successful in offsetting the weight of what has gone before. I think what has happened is that Johnson commits himself, because he is following Juvenal's plan, to offering a formal consolation at the end of the poem (just as he commits himself to the uncongenial attitude of a despiser of the big city in imitating the third satire). Naturally a Christian consolation must replace the pagan Stoicism of Juvenal's ending. But in both writers the poem's bulk sabotages the ending — a fact which Juvenal is very much aware of and apparently cultivates, because he offers his concluding advice no more seriously than he has proceeded all along, suggesting that the suppliant offer 'fortune-telling sausages from a splendid hog', *candiduli divina tomacula porci* (355), at the shrines of the gods.¹² Johnson is barred from this approach as much by the tone he has carefully established as by his personal piety. But if the 'enquirer' is admonished by the poet not to think religion vain, he is also instructed to seek for qualities of spirit — a healthful mind, resigned will, love, and faith — which are not inconsistent with a tragic view of life. The merit of Johnson's style here, according to Rachel Trickett, is that it is capable, 'at one and the same time, of conveying deep pessimism and fervent conviction ... the tone of Johnson's poetry as much as his style is peculiarly suited to the dual conception of the transience of this world and the steadfastness of the next'.¹³ But the Christian code presented here neither contains nor negates the facts of suffering and disappointment; it is offered as palliative.

There is a marked difference in treatment between Juvenal and Johnson, but I cannot agree with O'Flaherty that the poem *fails* because it violates our idea of the genre of satire, nor can I go along with Damrosch, whose *Samuel Johnson and the Tragic Sense* argues that Johnson was attempting to join the satiric and tragic modes in some higher synthesis.¹⁴ But there seems little reason why the tonal and formal elements of these different modes cannot permit some admixture. Cleanth Brooks, for example, in *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, takes an attitude quite different from Maynard Mack's, to argue that satiric tone might at its best coexist with tragic form:

It is possible to isolate, on the one hand, an attitude of almost pure approval or sympathy, and, on the other, one of almost complete disapproval (the negative or satiric). The extremes, of course, are never realized in absolute purity; but we can point to a simple and affectionate love poem as tending to mark one limit, and to a simple and direct satire as marking the other. Now it is apparent that an attitude of almost any complexity will involve a mixture of these basic attitudes, whether it

¹² Curiously, some of the most prestigious of Juvenal's commentators ignore the jocular tone of the ending: Gilbert Highet, for example, takes the concluding passage totally seriously in *Juvenal the Satirist* (Oxford, 1954), pp. 125-29.

¹³ *The Honest Muse: A Study in Augustan Verse* (Oxford, 1967), p. 245.

¹⁴ Patrick O'Flaherty, 'Johnson as Satirist: A New Look at *The Vanity of Human Wishes*', *ELH*, 34 (1967), 87; Leopold Damrosch, Jr., *Samuel Johnson and the Tragic Sense* (Princeton, 1972), p. 149.

be in love poetry, or religious poetry, or tragedy. If this is true, the highest type of satire will hardly be recognizable as such. It will merge imperceptibly into some form like tragedy, for example.¹⁵

The last sentence might have been written to describe Johnson's poem were it not that the converse situation applies here — tragic tone and satiric form.

The point of the controversy that has existed among writers such as Flaherty, Greene, Lascelles, and Damrosch may be that the poem's formal elements should not be the primary critical focus. Again Johnson's own lesson applies: we can speak with authority about a poem's effect, even when formal explanations fail. The usual effect of satire is variously appraised as derision, or ridicule, or indignation.¹⁶ It is not indignation which Johnson's survey of mankind arouses, much less derision, though I think the latter term fits Juvenal's effect well enough. The effect of *The Vanity of Human Wishes* is sadness — perhaps cathartic, but certainly profound and as certainly tragic in its dignity and inevitability.

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¹⁵ *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill, 1967), p. 230.

¹⁶ Louis Bredvold suggested in 'A Note in Defense of Satire' that *indignation* better describes the experience of satire than *derision*, which had been a customary term among theorists of the genre, *ELH*, 7 (1940), 258.

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