PREFACE TO VISIONS OF EXTREMITY IN MODERN LITERATURE

This appearance of my two Visions, now brought together as a single publication, is for me a gratifying event. I find in it the occasion to dwell upon the two of them as one projection—out there all at once to be grasped as a whole—of what I look upon as a continuous effort of many years. There were, I remind the reader, almost a dozen years between the two volumes, although, as my Preface to The Classic Vision makes clear, I came increasingly to look upon the second as a necessary sequel to the first, indeed as a completion of it. I was, it must be admitted, far less aware of a need for the second volume while I pursued the writing of most of the first. But the final chapter of The Tragic Vision did end by asking for the Classic to close in upon the new vistas it opened up. Most of the rest of that first volume was controlled by a strategy that would have had it close in upon itself, without opening onto an alternative vision; nor did I reframe the book in response to my belated sense that another was to follow, one which would make it only one part of a larger scheme. In a similar spirit, I have now chosen not to revise the earlier book, whether in light of the later or in recognition of the many dissatisfactions about it that all the years since 1960 have accumulated.

Although this first volume stands as a completed event, one created serially out of its historic moment, I have come, from my present perspective, to see its total meaning only as it
is absorbed into its conclusion and into the second work which followed in the direction of that conclusion. I have no doubt, then, that many areas of the Tragic are illuminated retrospectively by the explorations—apparently into new areas—of the Classic. The most obvious aid which the second volume provides to the reader of the first occurs in its initial chapter, the theoretical introduction. This chapter, “The Tragic Vision and the Classic Vision,” though a middleman, coming after the Tragic and before the Classic, seems in some ways an introduction to both, containing as it does many awarenesses which I did not have in the course of writing the Tragic but which the reader of the Tragic is much better off for observing.

The most useful of these is the distinction I make between the “visionary” and the “existent,” tragic or classic, and—more broadly—between orders of vision and orders of existence. There are, at moments, blurrings in the first volume between author or narrator on the one hand and the protagonist as his surrogate on the other, because the distinction between visionary and existent is not clearly and systematically drawn. Yet, in the novels I treat, the visionary’s “state of dialogue” must not be confused with the existent’s state of commitment. My lengthy (perhaps too lengthy) discussion of such distinctions at the outset of the Classic, accompanied—alas—by painful diagrams, contributes a clarification that should be read back into the Tragic. Though I naturally hope that my second volume represents some growth beyond the first, I take pleasure in finding that the first was so conceived as to be ready for—and receptive to—the sharper determinations of the second.

There is another contribution which the beginning of the second volume makes to the understanding of the first: it introduces the classic as a profoundly affirmative vision in our literature, thereby establishing it as an acceptable alternative to the “ethical” vision, a vision which The Tragic Vision treated derogatorily, as if—in its self-deceptions—it were the
only positive alternative to the tragic. So by rejecting the ethical, that volume seemed to reject all affirmation. With the tragic seen as a vision that speaks out of negation, there was a need to examine all the varieties of affirmative vision, bogus and authentic, and to discover the grounds for claiming aesthetic authenticity for any of them. In defining and comparing the classic and the religious, as well as the ethical—and all within the context of what the poet creates—the opening chapter to The Classic Vision is intended to serve this need. It should turn out to be a service to the reader of the Tragic as well. In the final chapter of the Tragic, for example, I do introduce—and dismiss as a variety of the ethical—the religious vision with its thematic and cosmic affirmation that forces me to question its literary authenticity. But the fuller and more systematic discussion that awaited my next volume should cast a backward light on that initial discussion. So here again I suggest the value of at least parts of the introductory chapter of the second volume functioning, though ex post facto, as an introduction to this volume as well. By extending, as well as balancing, my sense of the tragic, my later and more inclusive categories may further define what The Tragic Vision had originally been trying to mean.

In this wider view I now see these volumes as two parts of my investigation of the literature of extremity after the Renaissance. My new title for these twin volumes means to combine them in this way. As the opening chapter of The Classic Vision indicates, I have a common definition of the extremity which provokes the responses of both tragic and classic existents—the confrontation of that extremity by the first and the retreat from that extremity by the second. And the visionaries (tragic and classic) are those who furnish the dialogistic context through which the actions of the existents (tragic and classic) may be measured. (For a graphic view of the relations

1 In my title I use the word “modern” in this sense—and try to justify it in Chapter 2 of The Classic Vision.
of tragic to classic and of visionaries to existents, I refer the reader to the diagrams on pp. 6 and 42 of The Classic Vision.)

Since the title I now give to the two-volume set reflects my claim to the unity achieved by the literary extremity to which each half is an alternative response, I could very well have appropriated for my overall subtitle the original subtitle of The Tragic Vision. For I now see both volumes as "variations on a theme in literary interpretation," variations more widely spread than those originally included in the first volume alone. With the two volumes juxtaposed as they now are, it is more fitting for the subtitle of each volume to reflect the contrast between confronting and retreating from extremity. But I have appropriated for my overall title page the original epigraph to The Tragic Vision, that splendid description, from Thomas Mann's Doctor Faustus, of variations on the theme of lamentation: it is just such a "mammoth variation-piece of lamentation" that this twin-visioned work aspires to be, broadening out in circles as "movements, large-scale variations, which correspond to the textual units of chapters of a book." I must hope that the reader will find them appropriately "inspired," in each case, "by a certain passage of the text."

But I must hope also that, in finding the thematically varied "lamentation" in each of them, I have not reduced all my texts to "the text," the single text I require in order to range my variations around it. As I have argued elsewhere, the critic is always fated to impose his alien terms upon the unsuspecting work, which tries to go its own way in spite of him and his colleagues. He should always struggle with his fate, however, if he is a sensitive critic. I urge as strongly as I can, in my theoretical introduction to The Classic Vision (pp. 15-17), that, so long as my thematic categories are claimed to be only mine, and heuristic rather than substantive, I need not be fated to reduce the individual work to them. Instead, it should be my role to trace the ways in which that work, in pursuit of its uniqueness, varies from my categories as it
wrestles to free itself from all the limiting generic configurations which we critics, and readers generally, must use to tame it to our perceptual powers. In each case the reader must judge my success in adapting my terms to the work rather than the work to my terms. My only point here is that there is no theoretical reason why my generic procedure, from vision to vision, should preclude my chance to do justice to the individual works which I treat as expressing them. For I must treat works both as my examples and as the dialectical sinews that move my argument. Further, my definition of "thematics" (pp. 241-43, below) is meant to tie my notion of theme to the formal disposition of elements within the single work itself. Here is another attempt to protect the work from generic reductions, even though the latter are all that the critic has at his disposal. Once more I suggest that his awareness of his predicament, and his struggle against it, may lessen the damage he inflicts.

It was my fear of the critic's inevitably generic impositions that led me, at the outset of The Classic Vision (p. 8), to have second thoughts about my use of the term "vision." For, although my earlier volume had committed me to it, the term had since been appropriated by critics who universalized it as an independent essence that transcended the individual works which were then treated as mere manifestations of it. That such works (with their authors) could be grouped as a "company" united by vision was an indication to me that the vision was being taken as a substantive (if not a subsistent) entity. Such presumption offended my own critical skepticism, which apologizes for the use of universal terms as the critic's heuristic impositions and celebrates the radical discreteness of the work as it abjures all company, including the critic's. A vision which is not grounded in the unique disposition of elements that constitute the work, or—even worse—one that finds itself "embodied" by many works and many poets, surely threatens to be no more than a grossly monolithic reduction projected by the obsessed critic. I freely confess to the pos-
sibility (indeed even the likelihood) that, with such a charge, I have just described myself as well as others; but, unlike some others, I can claim that, if only in theory, I at least set out to do otherwise. To what extent I have succeeded I must leave to the reader, who I hope will discover here fewer generic claims about a common vision and more discrete claims that testify to the motley nature of the works themselves.

Insofar as I speak of the visions I have found or imposed, I prefer, in this preface to their joint publication, to dwell on the unity of my own vision rather than on any competition between the two visions I treat. So I shall not compare the timeliness of their respective appeals to our melodramatic moment in history; instead, I shall allow my remarks in my Preface to The Classic Vision to stand. These remarks point to the obvious and spectacular nature of this difference in their appeals to the reader who is our contemporary. For him, the traumatic rupture that sets off the tragic vision seems to hold a clear advantage over the healing instincts of the classic. The classic visionary neither leaps over the breach nor falls into it. He tries to patch it over, but he never tests what he knows to be the flimsiness of his repairs. He rather seeks his existence on other grounds.

Behind these alternative visions, as I see them emanating from our modern literature, I find a commonness of literary method. It is, in turn, the commonness of my critical method in treating it that constitutes the deepest claim to the unity of these volumes. Here is the most serious justification of my insistence that the second volume is an invaluable aid to the understanding of the first. It is especially serious to me because, as a theorist, I am anxious to establish the methodological claim which these volumes are intended to make. I see each of the works I treat, whether tragic or classic, as giving us its vision of extremity in the reduced forms which I term its master-metaphor (see pp. 17–31 and the Epilogue of The Classic Vision). This metaphoric reduction is to collapse the variegated world of “real” experience into itself, within an
exclusive vision of extremity that constitutes the metaphoric form of the entire literary work. For all of the "reality" outside the work is reduced to those figures of a private language that reads all experience as being under its exclusive sway. Yet the work's dialogistic power seems also to maintain, beyond the dimensions of its metaphor, the world of "real" objects as still standing outside the reductive visions of figural language. The "objective" world that is narrowed into a subject's metaphoric consistency yet persists in the breadth of its endless contingencies. The rigors of aesthetic restrictiveness expose, if unintentionally, those less definable areas they exclude.

The extent of the sovereignty of this reductive metaphor, as it encloses the commitment to extremity, helps determine whether the tendency of the vision is tragic or classic. It is tragic when the world totally becomes what the metaphor as word would make of it, to the denial of any other reality: the all-embracing metaphor leads to the embrace of extremity. On the other side, the readmission of the excluded world beyond language, the recognition of its right to call upon us, as language-driven animals, must modify vision in the direction of the classic. We are to be aware of the power of the extremity that language encloses, but no less aware of the sustenance of the more routine "realities" it excludes.

The reductive metaphor, then, would cut itself off from the world, reading the world in its own extreme terms. If it fails to return to that world, thereby failing to return that world to us, then in its isolation it festers and turns destructive, like many obsessed tragic existents in the volume that follows. This notion reminded my friend and colleague, James L. Calderwood, of the lines from Lear in which Albany comments to Goneril on the dangerous unnaturalness of filial ingratitude (4.2.32–36):

That nature which contemns its origin
Cannot be bordered certain in itself.
She that herself will sliver and disbranch
From her material sap, perforce must wither
And come to deadly use.

These lines can be seen also as an attack, not merely on art for art's sake, but on metaphoric autonomy or symbolic self-sufficiency. The "natural" way is for the part to reject metonymy and to return to the whole—the daughter to the father, the branch to the tree, the word to the workaday world beyond—as the "material sap" which feeds it. The alternative use is "deadly." So the reductive metaphor may run the risk of treating itself as the sole reality, but metonymy, finally, is to be seen as only a metaphor itself. "Only a metaphor"—it takes moral and aesthetic courage to speak the modest word "only" in spite of what our most intense literature teaches us of the powers of metonymy. But the works in the two volumes that follow, by the existential consequences they trace, warn against immodesty and thus in favor of the "only" that turns us again toward the world.

Here again, my method—of isolating reductive metaphors and of comparing the extent of their dominance over the work and the world—becomes explicit in The Classic Vision, while its use in The Tragic Vision is implicit only. I try to justify it as a method in my introduction to the later volume and write my Epilogue to emphasize this unity of procedure and to make clear its application to each of the works or authors I treat. In fact, perhaps to emphasize the conformity of this second volume to the method of the first, I summarize retrospectively (pp. 19-21 of The Classic Vision) the master-metaphors of the works treated in The Tragic Vision. Though I am convinced that my summaries emerged out of those earlier analyses, they were not as clear to me originally as they came to be once my method crystallized with the writing of The Classic Vision.

These are, I now acknowledge, austere volumes in the visions they pursue as in those they harshly reject. At least
they are methodologically austere in that they try to be rigorous in the enforcement of their definitions and in the nicety of their discriminations among the works ranged about those definitions. Consequently, it appears to me from this later perspective, they are philosophically austere as well. This may be their strength, depending on the merits of the claims they stake, however rigid their exclusions. But it clearly exposes them to our impatience; for there is in all of us the tendency to overrun definitions by exposing their limitations, if not their total inadequacy, as we see them seeking to constrict the variety of their victimized subjects. Thus, however more relaxed my later feelings may be—now that I am free from the compulsion that led me through the dozen or more years of pressing forward through literature with my visions—I respect the context of that pursuit and must allow the austerity to stand. And I do not modify the stringency with which I rejected the claims of other, more easily won affirmations to be visions of extremity that could be earned within a work that has poetic authenticity.

Why, then, does my present modesty insist on calling this double volume "Visions of Extremity" rather than "The Visions of Extremity"? Are there no other visions of extremity, as I have acknowledged? Who is to limit them? I would not deny their appearance in literature, though I do question whether some of them (all but two) ought to appear as the projected meaning of a thoroughly conceived fiction. My requirements for metaphoric completeness (at once thematic and formal) have led me to start beyond the ethical vision, seen as an evasion of extremity, and to stop (with Murder in the Cathedral) only at the threshold of the religious, which would be a transcendence of extremity. There may very well be an ironic vision, where the tragic and the classic meet (see the close of my discussion of Kafka in The Tragic Vision and of Swift in The Classic Vision). But such a vision achieves a self-consciousness through an infinitely regressive series of dialogues, which the critic's own work
ends by trying to rival. To do the ironic vision justice, then, would require not merely that I write another volume but that I start writing these volumes once more with a consciousness of already having done so. And for now I can go no further in that task than this Preface.

M.K.

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