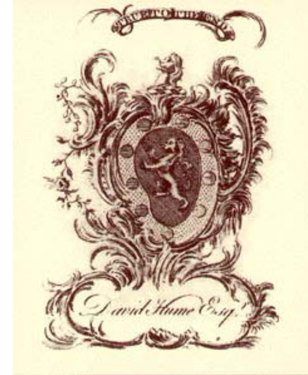

**Donald W. Livingston's *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium***

Alex Neil1

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# "An Unaccountable Pleasure": Hume on Tragedy and the Passions

ALEX NEILL

Hume begins his essay "Of Tragedy" with a description of what he calls "a singular phænomenon":

> It seems an unaccountable pleasure, which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions, that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy. The more they are touched and affected, the more are they delighted with the spectacle; and as soon as the uneasy passions cease to operate, the piece is at an end.... They are pleased in proportion as they are afflicted, and never are so happy as when they employ tears, sobs, and cries to give vent to their sorrow, and relieve their heart, swoln with the tenderest sympathy and compassion.
>
> The few critics who have had some tincture of philosophy, have remarked this singular phænomenon, and have endeavoured to account for it.[1]

The account of the audience's experience of tragedy that Hume goes on to offer in "Of Tragedy" has been the target of criticism since the essay was published. My purpose in what follows is to show that some of what may appear to be the most damaging of that criticism is based on a misinterpretation of the thesis that Hume develops in the essay. I shall not attempt to argue that Hume's thesis is persuasive; indeed, I believe and have argued

Alex Neill is at the Department of Philosophy, University of Southampton, Hants S17 1BJ ENGLAND.

elsewhere that it is not.[2] My project here is almost entirely interpretive: it is an attempt to get clear about what Hume's thesis concerning our experience of tragedy really is.

To that end, it should be noted that the apparently "unaccountable" pleasure Hume describes at the beginning of "Of Tragedy" is something that he has remarked on before. In Book I of the *Treatise*, he notes

> that in matters of religion men take a pleasure in being terrify'd, and that no preachers are so popular, as those who excite the most dismal and gloomy passions. In the common affairs of life, where we feel and are penetrated with the solidity of the subject, nothing can be more disagreeable than fear and terror; and *'tis only in dramatic performances and in religious discourses, that they ever give pleasure.*[3]

The phenomenon that Hume finds so remarkable in these passages from "Of Tragedy" and the *Treatise* is thus, at a minimum, that in certain circumstances, such as when we are at the theatre, we may find agreeable the experience of "the most dismal and gloomy passions." The explanation he gives of this phenomenon in the *Treatise* is as follows:

> In these latter cases the imagination reposes itself indolently on the idea; and the passion, being soften'd by the want of belief in the subject, has no more than the agreeable effect of enlivening the mind, and fixing the attention. (T 115)

Hume's explanation of how the experience of "uneasy" passions can be enjoyed when we are in church and at the theatre thus has two components. First, because we do not believe the stories we are told in church[4] and at the theatre, the uneasy passions we experience are not so very uneasy; as he puts it later in the *Treatise*, in such circumstances the passion in question "lies not with that weight upon us: It feels less firm and solid" (T 631). Second, a weakly disagreeable passion of this sort agreeably "enlivens" the mind and "fixes" (or as he says later, "rouzes") our attention.

By the time he wrote "Of Tragedy," however, Hume had come to regard this explanation of his "singular phænomenon" as inadequate. With regard to the idea that the passions, even if "uneasy," have the pleasurable effect of "enlivening" the mind (an idea which in "Of Tragedy" he attributes to Dubos), Hume objects that having one's mind "enlivened," one's attention "fixed" or "rouzed," need not be pleasurable: "the same object of distress, which pleases in a tragedy, were it really set before us, would give the most unfeigned uneasiness; though it be then the most effectual cure to languor and indolence" (OT 218). And as to the idea that the responses in question are "soften'd by the want of belief in the subject" (which in the essay he

attributes to Fontenelle), Hume notes that "want of belief" is not necessary for the sort of response in which he is interested: the audience of Cicero's speech against Verres was delighted as well as distressed by it, he points out, although they "were convinced of the reality of every circumstance." Thus the apparently "unaccountable" pleasure in question does not depend on and cannot be explained by an audience's conviction that what they are presented with in tragic drama is fiction.

There is a further reason that in writing "Of Tragedy" Hume was bound to regard the explanation of "tragic pleasure" that he had offered in the *Treatise* as inadequate. For in his description of the audience's experience of tragedy in the essay, Hume emphasises an aspect of that experience which goes unremarked in the *Treatise* and is not addressed by the explanation given there. This is the fact, as he saw it, that there appears to be a relation of *proportion* between the positive and the negative aspects of the audience's experience: "they are pleased in proportion as they are afflicted," so that "the more they are touched and affected, the more are they delighted with the spectacle." In contrast to his suggestion in the *Treatise* that the pleasurable character of the sort of experience in question depends on the "uneasiness" of the passions involved not being too great, in "Of Tragedy" Hume suggests that in the experience of tragic drama, the more affliction or "uneasiness" the better. Given this take on the matter, the explanation that he offered in the *Treatise* needs at the very least to be supplemented—as Hume says of Fontenelle's contribution to that explanation, "it wants still some new addition, in order to make it answer fully the phænomenon, which we here examine" (OT 219).

The "new addition" which Hume goes on to provide in "Of Tragedy" is based on the thought that the two affective elements in our experience of tragedy have different causes. On the one hand, the "sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions, that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy," are generated in us by our sympathy with the characters represented in the work.[5] The pleasure that we experience, on the other hand, is initially and primarily a result of our attention to "that very eloquence, with which the melancholy scene is represented." The display of "genius," "art" and "judgment" that we see in a "well-written" tragedy, "together with the force of expression, and beauty of oratorial numbers, diffuse[s] the highest satisfaction on the audience, and excite[s] the most delightful movements." This satisfaction and delight, being, as Hume has it, the dominant element of the experience, "overpowers" and somehow "*converts*" the negative feelings:

> The impulse or vehemence, arising from sorrow, compassion, indignation, receives a new direction from the sentiments of beauty.

> The latter, being the predominant emotion, seize the whole mind, and convert the former into themselves....

As a result of this process of conversion, "the soul, being, at the same time, rouzed by passion, and charmed by eloquence, feels on the whole a strong movement, which is altogether delightful" (OT 219–220).

Hume's appeal to the mutability of passion is the cornerstone of his account of our experience of tragedy; understanding the account depends on understanding what he thought affective conversion, as it might be called, involves. This will be my object in what follows.

According to Malcolm Budd, in a recent and very penetrating commentary on "Of Tragedy," the key to understanding Hume's account lies in recognising that Hume "acquiesced in the standard eighteenth century assumption that the experience [of tragedy] is purely pleasurable."[6] But if the experience is "purely" pleasurable, it is certainly not straightforwardly so. For according to Budd, "the experience of a well-written tragedy is, for Hume, not only one in which there is no unpleasantness, but one that is extraordinarily pleasurable—extraordinarily pleasurable at the very moments at which the spectator experiences the negative emotions." Hume's task "is therefore that of accounting for the intense pleasure, unqualified by pain... of a spectator of a well-written tragedy in whom negative emotions have been aroused in response to the tragic nature of what is represented in the play." His talk about the conversion of affect, then, is designed "to explain how a negative emotion is transformed into a positive emotion." (Budd 93–94) Flint Schier offers essentially the same interpretation of Hume's essay, suggesting that "the solution which Hume offers to the paradox of tragedy aims to explain the metamorphosis of painful terror into pleasant terror."[7]

As both Budd and Schier understand "Of Tragedy," then, Hume's claim in the essay is that what is problematic about our experience of "well-written" tragedy—what at first seems "unaccountable" about that experience—is that in engaging with tragedy, we experience as pleasant passions that normally, in other contexts, are experienced as "disagreeable and uneasy." Hume's aim in the essay, as they have it, is to provide an account for this phenomenon—to explain how it is possible.

If this reading of his account of our experience of tragedy is correct, then Hume has, as both Budd and Schier argue that he has, gone badly wrong. For it seems clear that, as this interpretation understands it, Hume's underlying conception of the "singular phænomenon" with which he is concerned is both "unduly narrow" and "quite wrong-headed" (Budd 97). Budd points to two major defects in what he takes to be Hume's approach:

> First, it limits the problem to the experience of spectators who are not pained by the represented suffering and misfortune of the tragedy's sympathetic characters. Second, it applies only to

> spectators who undergo negative emotions without in any way suffering, which seems impossible if unpleasantness is intrinsic to the experience of these emotions.... (Budd 103)

Budd is surely right that these would represent serious defects in an account of our experience of tragedy; indeed, any account limited in these ways would be not so much defective as obviously hopeless. So obviously hopeless, in fact, that it ought to be surprising to find Hume espousing such an account. In what follows, I show that he does not do so. I shall begin by arguing that there are reasons to doubt that Hume is guilty of either of the charges that Budd levels in the passage I have just quoted. I shall then argue that the view of tragic experience that Hume offers in "Of Tragedy" is in fact quite different from that which both Budd and Schier attribute to him.

Of the two charges that Budd levels against Hume, the second is the more fundamental, since it attacks what is, on the interpretation offered by Budd and by Schier, the central thesis in Hume's account of the tragic experience. This is the thesis that in our experience of tragedy, as Schier puts it, "the painful emotions are transformed into pleasurable ones, apparently without loss of identity. Terror is no longer painful at all, but pleasurable."[8] Budd's charge is that this sort of "hedonic engineering" of emotion, as it might be called, is in fact impossible. For some emotions, at least, are such that having a particular sort of "hedonic charge"—being experienced as pleasurable, say, or as "disagreeable and uneasy"—is intrinsic to the concepts of those emotions. (Budd 103) Thus Aristotle, for example, *defines* certain emotions partly in terms of their hedonic character: fear is "a kind of pain or disturbance resulting from the imagination of impending danger...," while pity is "a certain pain occasioned by an apparently destructive evil or pain's occurring to one who does not deserve it...."[9] Now if this view that the hedonic character of (at least some) emotions is essential to them is right, and it looks very plausible, then the claim that Budd and Schier hold to be central to Hume's account—the claim that in our experience of tragedy the hedonic charge of certain passions is changed from negative to positive while the passions themselves are left in place—must just be wrong. As Schier says, "there is something almost nonsensical about the notion of a pain-free terror."[10]

However, we should notice that if Hume does make this claim, then he is guilty not only of proposing something "almost nonsensical," but also of inconsistency. For in his account of the passions in Book II of the *Treatise*, Hume in fact endorses the thesis that the hedonic character of (at least some of) the passions is necessary to them. He claims, for example, that

> the passions, both direct and indirect, are founded on pain and pleasure.... Upon the removal of pain and pleasure there

> immediately follows a removal of love and hatred, pride and humility, desire and aversion, and of most of our reflective or secondary impressions. (T 438)

Now it may be objected that all that Hume says here is that the passions are always experienced as having *some* hedonic character, rather than that any of them essentially involves any *particular* hedonic character. But it is the latter that he has in mind, as is clear from such statements as that "admiration...is always agreeable" (T 374); that "pity is an uneasiness" (T 381); and that "pride is a pleasant sensation, and humility a painful; and upon the removal of the pleasure and pain, there is in reality no pride nor humility." This latter point he explicitly takes to be beyond argument: "Of this our very feeling convinces us; and beyond our feeling, 'tis here in vain to reason or dispute" (T 286).

Indeed, the account of the causes of the indirect passions that Hume develops in Book II of the *Treatise* depends on those passions having a particular hedonic charge. If pride, for example, were not essentially pleasurable —if it could be experienced as painful—then there would in effect be no way of distinguishing between pride and humility. For on Hume's account the objects of these passions are the same: the self. And with respect to their causes, what Hume calls the "subject" is the same—"either parts of ourselves, or something nearly related to us" (T 285). Where pride and humility differ is with respect to what he calls the "quality" that "inheres in" or is "plac'd on" the subject: in the case of pride, the quality is something "that produces a separate pleasure," in that of humility it is something that causes us "a separate uneasiness." Now if pride were to be experienced as painful, then, given Hume's thesis about the causal role of a double relation of impressions and ideas in the production of the indirect passions, the operative quality in this case should have to have caused us "a separate uneasiness." But now our hypothetical state—pride experienced as painful—would be a painful impression, the object of which is the self, and the cause of which is comprised of a subject that is in one way or another related to the self and a quality that causes pain. And that, of course, is on Hume's account precisely a description of humility. In short, on Hume's account, pride is essentially pleasurable; if we try to characterise a hedonically engineered pride, pride experienced as painful, we end up simply characterising something else: humility.

In the *Treatise*, then, Hume gives an account of the indirect passions that would make hedonic engineering of those states—the transformation of their hedonic charge from positive to negative, or vice versa—impossible. So if the central plank in his account of our experience of tragedy consists in an appeal to hedonic engineering of passion, as Budd and Schier suggest that it does, then it would appear that his position in "Of Tragedy" is simply

inconsistent with the account of the passions that he gives in the *Treatise*. While that is not out of the question, it is a conclusion that should surely be resisted unless it is unavoidable, and I shall argue below that it is not unavoidable.

But first, what of Budd's other charge, that Hume's account "limits the problem to the experience of spectators who are not pained by the represented suffering and misfortune of the tragedy's sympathetic characters"? Of course, if his account of our experience of tragedy is as Budd takes it to be, Hume would hardly have recognised this as an objection, for on Budd's interpretation of "Of Tragedy," Hume takes the pain-free nature of our experience of tragedy to be a quite general phenomenon. But does Hume really believe this? Does he really take the experience of spectators who are entirely undistressed by what a tragedy depicts as paradigmatic of our experience of tragedy in general? I suggest that he does not. Recall his introductory remarks in "Of Tragedy," where he describes the passions typically experienced by the spectators of tragedy as "passions in themselves disagreeable and uneasy." Budd takes this "in themselves" to mean something like "*by* themselves": he suggests that "what Hume means by saying that...an emotion is *in itself* 'disagreeable and uneasy'" is that it is one "such that if it is the only emotion experienced by someone on a certain occasion, then necessarily it is experienced as unpleasant" (Budd 103). But this is to attribute to Hume a very odd position indeed: what are we to make of the idea of affective states which are *necessarily* experienced as having a certain hedonic character when they are experienced alone, but are possibly experienced as having a quite different character when they are experienced in conjunction with other states? Hume himself does not elaborate on this idea at all; indeed, in the *Treatise*, as we have just seen, he offers an account of the passions that is inconsistent with it. In light of that account, I suggest that we make better sense of Hume's reference to "passions in themselves disagreeable and uneasy" if we take him to be referring to passions that are essentially or inherently so—and hence are experienced as such by the spectators of tragedy.

That this is what Hume has in mind is further suggested by what he goes on to say in his initial statement of the phenomenon with which he is concerned. He describes the spectators as "touched and affected," as "afflicted," and as giving "vent to their sorrow." He goes on to describe what they experience as "uneasy passions," with no qualifier to indicate that what he really means is something like "passions that are experienced as uneasy in most circumstances but not as such when we are engaging with works of tragedy." These remarks sit at best uneasily with the claim that in Hume's view our experience of good tragedy is one of "intense pleasure, unqualified by pain" (Budd 94). And what Hume goes on to say about the accounts of tragic experience offered by Dubos and by Fontenelle makes that claim look

less plausible still. The crux of Dubos' account, as Hume reports it, is this:

> nothing is in general so disagreeable to the mind as the languid, listless state of indolence, into which it falls upon the removal of all passion and occupation.... No matter what the passion is: Let it be disagreeable, afflicting, melancholy, disordered; it is still better than that insipid languor, which arises from perfect tranquillity and repose. (OT 217)

In short, the fact that a passion is disagreeable, according to Dubos, is no bar to its being a contributor to pleasure. Now it is clear from this statement that, at least as Hume understands him, Dubos is no advocate of hedonic engineering—of the view that in our experience of tragedy passions normally experienced as painful are experienced as pleasurable. Dubos' suggestion is not that when we are feeling insipidly languorous the "uneasiness" of negative emotional experience is somehow transformed into pleasurable feeling; it is rather that under certain conditions, *any* affective experience, even if it is "uneasy," is preferable to none. Now Hume's comment on this—"It is impossible not to admit this account, as being, at least in part, satisfactory" (OT 217)—suggests that he thinks that Dubos is at least asking the right question: namely, how is it that in certain circumstances—such as in engaging with a work of tragedy—we can take pleasure in the experience of distress? It is true that Hume does not think that Dubos has solved the problem as it arises with regard to our experience of tragedy, but it is important to notice what he thinks is wrong with the latter's account. If Hume were an advocate of hedonic engineering, as Budd and Schier suggest, then we should expect him to object that where Dubos has gone wrong is in his underlying conception of the phenomenon at hand; what is wrong with Dubos' account, from the point of view of the hedonic engineer, is that he has failed to see that the experience of tragedy is entirely free from pain or distress, that it is a purely pleasurable experience. But in fact Hume says nothing like this. His objection is rather that Dubos has overlooked the fact that there are contexts in which we would not take pleasure in the experience of negative emotions, no matter how invigorating that experience was; so appeal to the invigorating powers of emotion does not in itself explain the pleasure that we take in the experience of negative emotion when we are engaging with tragedy. What is wrong with Dubos' account, in fact, is that it fails to recognise the importance of the fact that our experience of a "well-written" tragedy is experience of a work of *art*. Dubos' clear assumption that the negative emotions experienced by the audience of tragedy are experienced *as* negative—which, again, is just what is mistaken in his account from the point of view of the hedonic engineer—goes entirely unremarked by Hume.

Fontenelle's "solution" to the puzzle of the pleasure that we take in tragedy is very different. The fact that in responding to tragedy we are responding to an artefact, to a story, is central to the account he offers. And in sharp contrast to Dubos, Fontenelle is clearly an advocate of the view that, in our experience of tragedy, passions that are normally experienced as unpleasant are experienced as having a different hedonic character. As Hume reports it, Fontenelle's view is that the "pain which we suffer from the misfortunes of those whom we love" (the characters) is "diminished" and "reduced" by our awareness that what we are responding to is fiction "to such a pitch as converts it into a pleasure." What we experience, as a result, is "an agreeable sorrow" (OT 218–219). Fontenelle, then, is a hedonic engineer.

As he did with Dubos' account, Hume partially endorses this "solution but once again he goes on to produce an objection, in this case a counter-example that cuts against both aspects of Fontenelle's account. "The epilogues of CICERO," Hume writes, are such that "it is difficult to read some of them without the deepest sympathy and sorrow." Particularly harrowing, he suggests, is "the pathetic description of the butchery, made by VERRES of the SICILIAN captains" (OT 219). This undercuts Fontenelle's suggestion that in engaging with tragedy "we comfort ourselves, by reflecting, that it is nothing but a fiction," because in this case, Hume notes, "the audience were convinced of the reality of every circumstance"—that is, they did not take the work to which they were responding to be "nothing but a fiction." But more importantly for my purposes here, Hume's objection also indicates his opposition to the thought that our experience of tragedy is purely pleasurable. Our response to some of Cicero's work, he insists, involves "the *deepest* sympathy and sorrow"—"deepest" as *opposed* to "diminished" or "reduced" or "agreeable." In effect, that is (and although the counterexample he uses is not of a tragedy), Hume holds Fontenelle's account to be defective in just the respect that Budd holds Hume's account to be defective—namely, "it limits the problem to the experience of spectators who are not pained by the represented suffering and misfortune of the tragedy's sympathetic characters" (Budd 103). This suggests that something has gone wrong in Budd's interpretation of Hume's account of our experience of tragedy.

Thus far, then, I have argued that what Hume says in the first half of "Of Tragedy," together with the theory of the passions that he offers in the *Treatise*, strongly suggests that he did not hold that our experience of tragedy is, as Budd puts it, "purely pleasurable" and that his talk of the conversion of feeling is not intended, as Schier has it, "to explain the metamorphosis of painful terror into pleasant terror." But then what *did* Hume think about the character of our experience of tragedy? What *are* his references to the conversion of affect in that experience intended to explain?

Hume first introduces the notion of affective conversion that he appeals to in "Of Tragedy" in the *Treatise*, where, for example, he writes:

> When two passions are already produc'd by their separate causes, and are both present in the mind, they readily mingle and unite, tho' they have but one relation, and sometimes without any. The predominant passion swallows up the inferior, and converts it into itself. (T 420)

It is important to notice that the idea of conversion that Hume appears to have in mind here is quite different from that to which both Budd and Schier suggest that he is appealing in "Of Tragedy." On their interpretation of the essay, as we have seen, conversion is such that, as Schier puts it, "the painful emotions are transformed into pleasurable ones, apparently without loss of identity. Terror is no longer painful at all, but pleasurable." However, in the passage just quoted, Hume suggests that conversion involves the "*swallowing up*" of one passion by another, so that the passion that is "converted" *does* thereby lose its identity: it is transformed into that which converts it. If we understand Hume's talk of conversion in "Of Tragedy" along these lines, then, the idea in the essay is not that in our experience of tragedy painful-terror is somehow converted into pleasurable-terror, but rather that painful-terror is converted into something else altogether—aesthetic delight, which Hume takes to be the dominant aspect of our affective experience in that context.[11]

If this were the notion of the conversion of passion that he has in mind in "Of Tragedy," then Hume would be in a somewhat stronger position than is suggested by Budd and by Schier. For since there is no suggestion here that conversion involves transforming a passion's hedonic character while somehow leaving the passion itself in place, this picture of the conversion of passion is at least consistent with Hume's view that the hedonic character of the passions is essential to them. If this were the notion of affective conversion that he has in mind in "Of Tragedy," then, Hume would not be guilty of the second of the charges that Budd levels against him.

Despite that, however, this notion of conversion cannot be carried over to "Of Tragedy" without considerable strain. For, like the understanding of conversion as hedonic engineering, it sustains the conception of our experience of tragedy as pain-free, a conception which is, as Budd says, clearly "wrong-headed," and which, as I have argued above, sits very uneasily with Hume's remarks on the apparently paradoxical nature of that experience. Indeed, the idea that the conversion of passion involves the eradication of one passion by another—the transformation of painful-terror not into pleasurable-terror but into pleasure *simpliciter*—is even harder to square with Hume's opening remarks in "Of Tragedy" than is the idea of conversion as

hedonic engineering. For he suggests at the start of the essay that "as soon as the uneasy passions cease to operate, the piece is at an end" (OT 216). But if the pleasure that we take in tragedy depends in large part on the conversion of the "uneasy passions," and if the conversion of those passions involves their being transformed into something else and hence their ceasing to "operate," the implication of this remark is, first, that we fully enjoy well-written tragedies only as they are coming to an end, and second—given Hume's view that conversion of the "subordinate movement" into the "predominant" (OT 221) is almost inevitable when two passions "are both present in the mind"—that such tragedies are typically very short! Neither of these look like very plausible candidates for what Hume might have had in mind.

The idea of conversion as the transformation of one passion into another, then, is hardly more plausible in the context of the audience's experience of tragedy, and hence no happier an interpretation of Hume's talk of affective conversion in the essay, than is that of conversion as hedonic engineering. I shall argue now that we are not forced to attribute either idea to him. In fact, I suggest, Hume has something altogether different in mind.

To begin with, we should note that the passage from the *Treatise* quoted above, in which Hume speaks of affective conversion as though he takes it to involve the transformation of *passion*, is in fact very much an exception to the rest of his talk about affective conversion. When he first introduces the notion, he notes that "'Tis a remarkable property of human nature, that any *emotion*, which attends a passion, is easily converted into it, tho' in their natures they be originally different from, and even contrary to each other" (T 419). He goes on to say that "The *spirits*, when once excited, easily receive a change in their direction; and 'tis natural to imagine this change will come from the prevailing affection" (T 420); and he notes that:

> 'tis observable that an opposition of passions commonly causes a new emotion in the spirits, and produces more disorder, than the concurrence of any two affections of equal force. *This new emotion* is easily converted into the predominant passion, and encreases its violence, beyond the pitch it wou'd have arriv'd at had it met with no opposition. (T 421, my emphases)

In later sections, he refers to the "principle, that every *emotion*, which precedes or attends a passion, is easily converted into it" (T 423), and "that any attendant *emotion* is easily converted into the predominant" (T 424; emphasis in this and the preceding quotations in this paragraph added). What is converted or given "a new direction," that is, is not passion itself but rather the "emotion" or "spirit" which "attends a passion."

This way of speaking is echoed in most of what Hume says about the conversion of affect in "Of Tragedy." In our experience of tragedy, he writes:

> the whole impulse of those [melancholy] passions is converted into pleasure, and swells the delight which the eloquence raises in us.... The impulse or vehemence, arising from sorrow, compassion, indignation, receives a new direction from the sentiments of beauty. The latter, being the predominant emotion, seize the whole mind, and convert the former into themselves, at least tincture them so strongly as totally to alter their nature...
>
> [The fact that tragedy is mimetic] serves still farther to smooth the motions of passion, and convert the whole feeling into one uniform and strong enjoyment.... The affection, rouzing the mind, excites a large stock of spirit and vehemence; which is all transformed into pleasure by the force of the prevailing movement. (OT 220–221)

As it is in almost all of his talk of conversion in the *Treatise*, then, Hume's claim in "Of Tragedy" is that it is the *"emotion"*—the "impulse" or "vehemence" or "spirit" or "movements"—associated with the "melancholy passions" that is converted or given "a new direction" in our experience of tragedy. And given contemporary usage, in which the term "emotion" is commonly used to refer to what Hume calls the "passions," it is worth noting that (although on this as on other matters he is less than consistent in his terminology) Hume does not treat the terms "passion" and "emotion" as coextensive.[12] We have already seen that he refers to passions being "preceded" and "attended" by emotions. Elsewhere, he talks of the passions causing emotion; for example: "love and hatred are not compleated within themselves, nor rest in *that emotion, which they produce*, but carry the mind to something farther" (T 367, my emphasis), and "there are certain calm desires and tendencies, which, tho' they be real passions, produce little emotion in the mind" (T 417). Indeed, there can be passion in the absence of emotion: "when a passion has once become a settled principle of action...it directs the actions and conduct without that opposition and emotion which so naturally attend every momentary gust of passion" (T 419). This latter point indicates that while Hume clearly thinks that emotions or "movements" may be experienced as pleasurable or otherwise, he does not suppose that the hedonic tone of the passions lies wholly in the emotions or movements associated with them. For as we have seen, he holds both that all the passions are experienced as having some hedonic tone (see for example T 438), and that some passions may involve no emotion: the hedonic tone of those passions, then, cannot lie in emotion.

Given that he does not treat "passion" and "emotion" as co-extensive, a very different picture from those we have considered thus far of what Hume

may have had in mind in his talk of affective conversion in our experience of tragedy becomes available. On this picture, our experience of tragedy has two main affective components: aesthetic delight, generated in us by the display of artistry in a well-written tragedy, and the "uneasiness" of "the melancholy passions" which are generated by our sympathy with the characters. The former is the "predominant" component of the experience, and it appropriates some of the emotion (movements, impulse, spirit, vehemence) of the weaker negative passions to itself, thus increasing its "force."[13] However, it is the emotions or movements produced by the negative passions that are appropriated and converted, rather than the negative passions themselves. On this picture of conversion, that is, conversion leaves the negative passions in place. The latter *contribute* to pleasure—as Hume puts it, they "afford the highest entertainment"—by generating emotion which is appropriated by and hence "swells the delight which eloquence raises in us," but that is not to say that the negative passions themselves are transformed into aesthetic delight, nor that they are somehow experienced as pleasurable while nonetheless retaining their identity. What is true, however, is that the appropriation of their "movements" renders them less forceful or turbulent than they would have been otherwise—this, I suggest, is what Hume means when he says that in our experience of good tragedy the negative passions are "smoothed, and softened, and mollified." And the result is that the character of our experience overall is pleasurable: "the soul...feels on the whole a strong movement, which is altogether delightful" (OT 220).

On the interpretation of "Of Tragedy" offered by Budd and by Schier, then, Hume's claim is that in the experience of tragedy passions that are in most contexts experienced as "disagreeable and uneasy" are instead experienced as pleasurable. In contrast, on the interpretation of his thesis that I am proposing here, Hume's point is rather that in certain contexts pleasure can be derived from the experience of "disagreeable and uneasy" passions. The difference between these points is easily missed (indeed, Hume himself obscures it) but it is crucial; as crucial, for example, as the difference between the claim that masochists sometimes do not experience pain as painful—which is nonsensical—and the claim that masochists sometimes take pleasure in the experience of pain—which is true.

Needless to say, the text of "Of Tragedy" does not provide conclusive and unambiguous support for this interpretation of Hume's talk of affective conversion—any more than it does for either of the others that we have considered. Hume's style in the essay is, to put it charitably, loose, and there are several passages in which it is just not clear what he is getting at. Nonetheless, there are a number of considerations which make the understanding of affective conversion as the appropriation of emotion more attractive than its competitors.

To begin with, we should note that this picture of conversion is at least as successful as are the other interpretations that we have considered in providing an explanation of what Hume takes to be the really puzzling (as he says, seemingly "unaccountable") aspect of our experience of tragedy: the fact that in responding to tragedy the spectators "are pleased in proportion as they are afflicted" (OT 217). For the more "uneasy" passions the spectators experience in responding to a work of tragedy, the more emotions or movements there will be to be appropriated by and hence fuel the delight that they take in the artistry; the more a "well-written" work of tragedy hurts, then, the greater the pleasure experienced by its audience will be.

Furthermore, this understanding of conversion as the appropriation of emotion has the advantage that it makes much more sense of the account of tragic experience that Hume offers in "Of Tragedy" than do either of the others that we have considered. As we have seen, if we attribute to Hume the idea of conversion as hedonic engineering, then his account of tragic experience is, as Budd says, hopelessly "wrong-headed": wrong about the experience itself, in taking it to be one of unalloyed pleasure, and not only wrong about the nature of the passions, but also inconsistent with his own account of the latter. And if we attribute to him the idea of conversion as the transformation of passion, his account of tragic experience looks only slightly better, for although it is at least consistent with his account of the passions, this picture of conversion also construes our experience of tragedy as experience that is entirely pleasurable. On the interpretation of his talk of affective conversion that I have offered here, however, Hume is not guilty of either blunder: understood in terms of the appropriation of emotion, his appeal to conversion can be seen as an attempt to explain the "singular phænomenon" of the audience's experience of tragedy that is consistent with his view that the hedonic tone of the passions is essential to them, and that does not suggest that our experience of tragedy is one of unadulterated pleasure.

But of course charity is not the only consideration here. More compelling support for the interpretation of conversion as the appropriation of emotion comes from the "other instances" that Hume offers "to confirm this theory" in the second half of the essay (OT 221 ff). These other instances fall into two groups: first, cases in which "subordinate" and negative feelings are appropriated by "predominant" positive feelings, as he thinks happens in our experience of tragedy; and second, cases in which negative feelings are supposed to predominate over pleasure, so that it is the latter that undergoes conversion and "farther encreases the pain and affliction of the sufferer" (OT 223). None of these illustrations depict cases in which the hedonic tone of a passion is changed while the passion itself is left in place. Budd takes this fact to be further evidence of the failure of Hume's account of our experience of tragedy (Budd 98–100), but in fact, I suggest, it rather indicates

that conversion as hedonic engineering is not the "theory" that Hume takes these cases to "confirm."

I should emphasise that my concern here is not with what picture of affective conversion (if any) is in fact supported by the "other instances" that Hume offers; it is rather with what these instances suggest about what Hume himself had in mind in his talk of conversion. The second set of illustrations—those in which negative feeling predominates over positive—are not particularly helpful in this regard. In the first case of this sort, for example, Hume asks:

> Who could ever think of it as a good expedient for comforting an afflicted parent, to exaggerate, with all the force of elocution, the irreparable loss, which he has met with by the death of a favourite child? The more power of imagination and expression you here employ, the more you encrease his despair and affliction. (OT 223)

Hume's point here appears to be that the parent's distress at his loss will dominate and convert the pleasure that he derives from the tactless comforter's eloquence in such a way as to heighten his misery. This is clearly the idea in the second of his illustrations of this sort: as Verres listened to Cicero's denunciation of him, Hume supposes, he would have experienced "shame, confusion, and terror" involving "pain and uneasiness," all of which "were too strong for the pleasure arising from the beauties of [Cicero's] elocution" (OT 223). Now in both cases, the point looks hopeless, since it is no more likely that a bereaved parent would take any pleasure in his would-be comforter's "force of elocution" than it is that Verres would have derived pleasure from "the noble eloquence and vehemence" of Cicero. Again, however, the issue at hand is not the plausibility or otherwise of the illustrations themselves, but rather what they suggest with regard to what Hume took affective conversion to involve. And in the illustrations under consideration, all that seems clear is that he did not have hedonic engineering in mind: there is no suggestion that the bereaved parent or Verres somehow experience pleasure as painful. Beyond that, the illustrations are unhelpful: Hume simply does not say enough to indicate whether he thought that some of the pleasure that the bereaved parent / Verres are supposed to derive from the eloquence of the would-be comforter / Cicero will persist in the face of the distress that it fuels, as the understanding of conversion as the appropriation of emotion would have it, or whether he supposed rather that in these cases pleasure will be extinguished by distress, as the understanding of conversion as the transformation of passion would suggest. Neither seems any more likely than the other; which is unsurprising, given the implausibility of the presupposition—that the parent/ Verres will be delighted by the eloquence in question in the first place—on which both are based.[14]

In fact, none of the illustrations which Hume offers of cases in which distress is supposed to predominate over pleasure is of any help in getting clear about just which notion of affective conversion he has in mind in "Of Tragedy." When he comes to sum up these illustrations, however, Hume is more explicit. "Raise so the subordinate passion that it becomes the predominant," he writes, and "it swallows up that affection which it before nourished and encreased. Too much jealousy extinguishes love: Too much difficulty renders us indifferent: Too much sickness and infirmity disgusts a selfish and unkind parent" (OT 224-225). This seems clearly to indicate that he takes affective conversion to involve the transformation of passion: "too much jealousy *extinguishes* love."

But does this represent what Hume thinks about the affective conversion that takes place in our experience of tragedy? When we consider the other examples of affective conversion that he offers, the cases in which positive feeling predominates over negative, it becomes clear that it does not. Again, these examples are not all persuasive when considered as pieces of empirical psychology, but taken as a whole they do indicate that what Hume has in mind in his talk of affective conversion is neither the transformation of one passion into another nor hedonic engineering.

For example, Hume suggests that "Parents commonly love that child most, whose sickly infirm frame of body has occasioned them the greatest pains, trouble, and anxiety in rearing him. The agreeable sentiment of affection here acquires force from sentiments of uneasiness" (OT 221). Clearly, the acquisition of "force" in this case is not a matter of hedonic engineering; there is no suggestion here that the parents' pain and anxiety are somehow experienced as pleasurable. Nor does Hume suggest that the pain and anxiety are extinguished by, in the process of being transformed into, love. The natural way to construe such a case—and to understand Hume as construing it—is surely as one where the pain and anxiety persist in conjunction with love, and persist as "uneasy." That construction of the matter would be unavailable to Hume if he took conversion (or the acquisition of force) to involve either hedonic engineering or the transformation of passion, but it is entirely consistent with the picture of conversion as the appropriation of emotion.

That the latter picture is what Hume has in mind is further suggested by the rest of the illustrations he offers. For example:

> Had you any intention to move a person extremely by the narration of any event, the best method of encreasing its effect would be artfully to delay informing him of it, and first to excite his curiosity and impatience before you let him into the secret. This is the artifice practised by IAGO in the famous scene of SHAKESPEARE; and every spectator is sensible, that OTHELLO'S jealousy acquires additional

> force from his preceding impatience, and that the subordinate passion is here readily transformed into the predominant one. (OT 221)

Hume's suggestion here is that because of a person's initial curiosity and/or impatience, their response to whatever is revealed is likely to be more "extreme" or "forceful" than it would otherwise have been. But how does the preceding response give "additional force" to that which succeeds it? Again it seems clear that Hume does not have hedonic engineering of passion in mind: he is not suggesting that a person's curiosity and impatience persist but with an altered hedonic tone once the secret has been revealed. Nor, despite his comment that "the subordinate passion is here readily transformed into the predominant one," would he appear to have in mind the transformation and hence extinction of one passion by another, for, as he must have been aware, in such a case what extinguishes curiosity and impatience is not the passion that whatever is revealed arouses in us, but rather the fact that the desire to have something revealed, to be let into the secret, has been satisfied. Othello's impatience, that is, is extinguished not by his jealousy, but rather by his learning what he takes to be the truth. Again, then, how does Hume suppose that the jealousy "acquires additional force" from the impatience? His thought, I suggest, is that it does so by the appropriation of emotion: the movements generated by curiosity are appropriated by and become part of the movements of jealousy.

And it is by attributing this thought to Hume that we make most sense of the rest of the "other instances" to which Hume draws our attention. If we take them to be attempts to illustrate hedonic engineering or the transformation of one passion into another, on the other hand, Hume's examples become next to nonsensical. For example, the interpretative strategy I have outlined allows us to understand his remark that "nothing endears so much a friend as sorrow for his death" (OT 222) as drawing our attention to (and doubtless exaggerating) a perfectly familiar manifestation of sentimentality. In contrast, the interpretations of affective conversion as hedonic engineering or as the transformation of passion force us to take him to be claiming either that our affection for a person causes us to experience sorrow at their demise as pleasant, or as claiming that any sorrow that their death may cause us is extinguished by the affection in which we held them—both of which are grotesquely implausible. Again, when Hume notes that "jealousy is a painful passion; yet without some share of it, the agreeable affection of love has difficulty to subsist in its full force and violence" and that "absence is also a great source of complaint among lovers, and gives them the greatest uneasiness: Yet nothing is more favourable to their mutual passion than short intervals of that kind" (OT 222), his point seems to be the familiar one that love can thrive on the "uneasiness" caused by separation

and jealousy—a phenomenon made much of by romance writers and greetings card manufacturers. One can see how it might be thought (though perhaps mistakenly) that this phenomenon is explained by the appropriation of the "movements" of one passion by another. If we take Hume to be trying to illustrate hedonic engineering or the transformation of passion here, however, we are forced to construe him as claiming either that lovers experience jealousy and the misery caused by separation as pleasurable, or—since love extinguishes those feelings in transforming them into itself—that lovers hardly experience such misery at all! And, again, these look like deliberately perverse ways of taking Hume's point.

I have argued that when Hume claims that the apparently paradoxical connection between pleasure and distress in our experience of tragedy is explained by the process of affective conversion, he is not claiming that in responding to tragedy we experience as pleasant passions that are normally experienced as painful. Nor is he claiming that in our experience of tragedy the painful passions are extinguished by, in the process of being transformed into, pleasure. What Hume has in mind in his talk of affective conversion is rather the appropriation by one passion of the emotions or movements produced by another, a process that strengthens the first passion without extinguishing or changing the hedonic character of the second. His account of our experience of tragedy is thus far less eccentric than is often supposed: it is neither based on a presupposition that that experience is one of unalloyed pleasure, nor inconsistent with the theory of the passions that he defends in the *Treatise*. This is not to say that Hume's account of our experience of tragedy is persuasive. But how and why it is not is another story.

## NOTES

Thanks to Tony Pitson, Aaron Ridley, Cynthia Rostankowski and an anonymous *Hume Studies* referee for helpful comments on earlier drafts.

1 "Of Tragedy," in *Hume's Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, revised edition 1987): 216–217. (Hereafter, page references in the text to "Of Tragedy," cited as "OT", will be to this edition.)

2 See my "Hume's 'Singular Phœnomenon'," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 39. 2 (1999), 112-125.

3 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978): 115, emphasis added. He makes a similar point in the Appendix to the *Treatise*, 631. (Hereafter page references to the *Treatise*, cited as "T," will be in the text.)

4 A few paragraphs before the passage just quoted he has noted that "tho' the vulgar have no formal principles of infidelity, yet they are really infidels in their hearts, and have nothing like what we can call a belief of the eternal

duration of their souls" (T 114).

5 Hume is less than explicit in "Of Tragedy" about the role played by sympathy in the generation of these responses. But that role is suggested by his remark about the spectators' hearts being "swoln with the tenderest sympathy and compassion," and is stated explicitly, if only in passing, at T 369.

6 Malcolm Budd, "Hume's Tragic Emotions," *Hume Studies* 17.2 (1991): 93–106. The quotation is from 93. (Further references to this article, cited as "Budd," will be in the text.)

7 Flint Schier, "The Claims of Tragedy: An Essay in Moral Psychology and Aesthetic Theory," *Philosophical Papers* 18.1 (1989), 7–26. The quotation is from 15.

8 Flint Schier, "Tragedy and the Community of Sentiment," in *Philosophy and Fiction: Essays in Literary Aesthetics*, edited by Peter Lamarque (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1983), 76.

9 Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, translated by H. C. Lawson-Tancred (Penguin Books, 1991), 153 and 163.

10 Schier, "Tragedy and the Community of Sentiment," 79.

11 Mark Packer interprets "Of Tragedy" along these lines in "Dissolving the Paradox of Tragedy," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 47.3 (1989), 211–219.

Given Hume's view that the hedonic tone of passion is an essential aspect of it, the conception of conversion as hedonic engineering in effect collapses into this conception of conversion as the transformation of a passion into something else. For if a passion's hedonic tone is essential to it, then changing that tone from negative to positive will of course involve changing the passion into something different.

12 Although this much is clear, not much else about Hume's use of "emotion" is. In the *Treatise* he uses the term in such a bewildering variety of ways that it seems unlikely that he has anything approaching a consistent or unified view of the relation between emotion and passion. The interpretation that I offer here is consistent with a good deal, perhaps most, of his talk about emotion and passion, particularly around the crucial passages on conversion, and it has the virtue, as I argue below, of allowing us to make some sense of the position that he develops in "Of Tragedy." But it would be idle to pretend that it receives unambiguous support from the text of the *Treatise*. No interpretation of the matter is likely to receive that.

13 In "The Claims of Tragedy," Flint Schier acknowledges that Hume has in mind something like this, but he claims, I think mistakenly, that Hume holds it *in addition* to the idea of affective conversion as hedonic engineering. As Schier puts it: "Fear and pity change their hedonic value, and they impart a bit of their vivacity to our appreciation of the aesthetic virtuousity of the playwright and actor. So the play is more pleasant for having provoked pity and terror; pity and terror are provoked only to be transfigured into forms of pleasure" ("The claims of Tragedy," 16).

14 Aaron Ridley has suggested to me that Hume's first illustration can be

understood in such a way that it does not involve this presupposition; perhaps the point is that a would-be comforter might succeed in delighting a bereaved parent not directly by virtue of his "force of elocution" but rather by reminding the parent of what a wonder the child was, how engaging and talented, and so on; this thought or memory of the child, rather than the comforter's eloquence, may be something that gives pleasure to the parent. Hume's emphasis on the tactless comforter's use of "all the force of elocution" and "power of imagination and expression" makes it unlikely that this is what he had in mind, I think. In any case, even construed in this way, the illustration is unilluminating with regard to just what Hume might have thought was involved in affective conversion.