

Sympathy, tragedy and the morality of sentiment in Lessing's Laocoon

Book or Report Section

Accepted Version

Harloe, K. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0207-5212>
(2017) Sympathy, tragedy and the morality of sentiment in Lessing's Laocoon. In: Lifschitz, A. and Squire, M. (eds.) Re-thinking Lessing's Laocoon: Classical Antiquity, the German Enlightenment and the 'Limits' of Painting and Poetry. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 157-176. ISBN 9780198802228
Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/66254/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Publisher: Oxford University Press

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

Sympathy, Tragedy, and the Morality of Sentiment in Lessing's Laocoon

Katherine Harloe, University of Reading, UK

In the course of his discussion of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* in *Laocoon*, Chapter 4, Lessing takes issue with some comments of Adam Smith concerning humans' capacity to sympathize with others' physical pain. Although Lessing disagrees with Smith, their views have more in common than at first appears. Lessing's recourse to Smith has not received as much attention within discussions of his ideas about pity ('Mitleid') as has his reading of other philosophers in the Anglophone sentimental tradition, such as Shaftesbury or Hutcheson; nor has the relation of Lessingian 'Mitleid' to Smithian 'sympathy' attracted as much commentary as, say, its relation to Rousseau.¹ My primary purpose in this paper is not to contribute to the intellectual–historical debate over the influence of other European thinkers on Lessing's psychological and ethical thought. It is to argue that the intrusion of Adam Smith into *Laocoon*'s early chapters is revelatory of a twin set of concerns: with the character of dramatic poetry and with its emotional and ethical effects, which are seldom expressed explicitly in the course of Lessing's essay but which nevertheless pervade that work.

These themes are little discussed in the scholarly commentary on *Laocoon*, since Lessing's essay has been received canonically as an argument for *autonomy* of the arts from moral considerations. It has also been suggested that drama plays surprisingly little role in *Laocoon* as we have it.² Yet the paratextual material suggest that thoughts about tragedy, and especially about tragic pity, provided both the seed, as well as the intended summation, of Lessing's essay on the distinction between the arts. It was in all likelihood Moses Mendelssohn who first brought Winckelmann's moralising interpretation of Laocoon's suppressed screams to Lessing's attention in the context of their mid-1750s debates about whether pity or moral admiration ('Bewunderung') is the proper end of tragedy.³ An oft-quoted letter of 1769 to Friedrich Nicolai shows the direction in which Lessing planned to develop *Laocoon*'s distinction between natural and arbitrary signs, projecting a 'third part' which would argue for drama's superiority on the basis of its ability to convert the arbitrary signs deployed by other poetic genres into 'natural signs of arbitrary things'.⁴ Chapters 1–4 are where drama intrudes most obviously into the *Laocoon* as we have it; I shall suggest that the arguments Lessing levies against Smith provide a bridge between the *Laocoon* and Lessing's earlier and later musings on tragic pity.

In doing so, they also connect the famous formal and semiotic distinctions Lessing presents at the heart of this text to his ongoing concern with (tragic) dramaturgy. Reconstructing the tragic framing of Lessing's arguments about the provinces of painting and poetry has the potential to illuminate those arguments in ways sometimes overlooked by commentators who have treated

¹ Exceptions are Heidsieck 1983 and Vogl 2004. On Lessing's reading of Hutcheson and Shaftesbury see Nisbet 1993. The influence of Rousseau on Lessing's thoughts about pity is much debated. See in particular Schings 1980, Michelsen 1990: 107–36. On Lessing's overall understanding of pity in the context of his dramatic theory see especially Martinec 2003, 2006; Tucci 2005.

² Gombrich 1957: 141–2; Nisbet 2013: 325.

³ Mendelssohn to Lessing, December 1756; in Lessing 1972: 69–75, 73. For more on this correspondence, known to scholarship as the *Briefwechsel über das Trauerspiel*, see section I below.

⁴ Lessing to Nicolai, 26 May 1769; in Lessing 1987: 608–11. English translation in Nisbet 1985: 133–4. See Beiser 2011: 276–7 and Beiser's chapter in this book.

them in the manner of a free-floating, philosophical discussion. While it has been noted that the distinctions Lessing draws between the objects (bodies v. actions) and media (natural v. arbitrary signs) of painting and poetry are framed by the fundamental principle that *illusion* is the goal of the arts, it is appreciated less frequently that by time Lessing came to draft his essay in the early 1760s, illusion had become an established topic of debate in dramatic theory, which itself drew upon a longer tradition of discussion in the visual arts.⁵ Lessing was fully versed in the writings of Francophone authors such as Fénelon and Diderot, who had turned to Greek tragedy in the course of propounding a new and more naturalistic theatrical code. The model of Sophocles in particular was often advanced in these debates as the antithesis to the highly conventionalised, ‘classical’ French tragedies of the *siècle de Louis le Grand*. Far from constituting the unacknowledged frame of the classical view of representation, the question of illusion was vigorously debated in Lessing’s own generation, precisely in the context of tragic drama.

If these debates form the background to Lessing’s invocation of *Philoctetes* in *Laocoon*, his turn to Smith reveals how far his concern to distinguish between the arts is ethically laced. For Lessing’s defence of Sophocles against Smith is not achieved primarily on the grounds of his tragedies’ alleged naturalism of language and character, but on the basis of their emotional effect: namely, their success at arousing *pity* in their audience. Pity is, moreover, understood by both Lessing and Smith as a quintessentially moral and social emotion.⁶ Despite its abstractions and appearance of *l’art pour l’art*, ethical and social concern still underlies *Laocoon*.

Finally, throughout all these debates and concerns we may detect the ‘classical presence’ of Aristotle, whose poetic categories – albeit transformed – continued to play an authoritative role in the dramatic theorising of Lessing’s day. Concerns with ‘illusion’ and ‘sympathy’ trace their genealogies back to the Aristotelian categories of ‘mimesis’ and ‘pity’, and eighteenth-century criticisms of critical categories such as the three unities are disagreements over the interpretation of Aristotle as often as they are attempts to move beyond him.⁷ Lessing’s desire to found his views about the character and purpose of tragic drama on the *Poetics* is explicit in the 1756–7 correspondence on tragedy and the 1767–9 *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*. Although implicit, it is nonetheless present in *Laocoon*.

LAOCOON 1–4 AND THE TURN TO SOPHOCLES

Let us begin by examining the train of argument that leads Lessing to cite Smith. The discussion comes in the course of *Laocoon*, Chapter 4’s consideration of the propriety of poetic depictions of bodily pain. Lessing has already defended Virgil’s description of Laocoon’s screams in accordance with his developing theoretical distinctions: *qua* poet, Virgil is confined neither to depicting beauty nor to representing a single moment; his description of how the Trojan priest ‘clamores horrendos ad sidera tollit’ is therefore immune from censure on these grounds. But Lessing goes on to concede that Virgil is ‘purely a narrative poet’. In the case of drama, a genre

⁵ On the importance of illusion see Giuliani 2003: 2; see too Wellbery 1984: 9–42 on the Enlightenment ideal of ‘a completely transparent language that is equivalent to divine cognition’ (42).

⁶ Heidsieck 1983.

⁷ Billings 2014: 19–44 provides an overview of French and German debates over tragedy from the late seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century which emphasises the continuing importance of Aristotle.

of poetry destined to be turned by actors into a kind of ‘living painting’, do the restrictions he has identified for the visual arts still apply?

It is here that Lessing turns to the *Philoctetes*:

In it [drama] we do not merely make believe that we see or hear a screaming Philoctetes, we actually see and hear him. The closer the actor approaches nature the more our eyes and ears must be affronted; for it is an incontrovertible fact that they are affronted in nature itself when we perceive such loud and violent expressions of pain. Besides, we are generally unable to respond with the same degree of sympathy to physical pain as to other suffering. Our imagination can discern too little in such pain to allow the mere sight of it to arouse in us anything of a corresponding feeling. Consequently, Sophocles may easily have violated not a merely conventional sense of propriety, but one that is grounded in the very nature of our feelings, when he made Philoctetes and Hercules moan and weep, scream and howl to such a degree.⁸

Lessing’s choice of the *Philoctetes* is appropriate, for it is a distinguishing feature of that tragedy that a great part of the hero’s suffering consists in physical torment. Sophocles’ treatment of the myth emphasises this element: Philoctetes’ groans of agony are first heard off-stage, and although Heracles predicts at the end of the play that Philoctetes will be healed his words suggest that it is the hero’s ‘sufferings’ (*ponoi*) that will continue to bring him fame.⁹ The *Philoctetes* also places onstage a prolonged representation of a man in the throes of violent physical pain. In the play’s second episode (the ‘third act’, in Lessing’s terminology), the principal action consists in the hero’s groans and cries as he struggles with the agony of his divinely inflicted wound:

Philoctetes

Ahh! Ahh!

Neoptolemus

What is it?

Philoctetes

Nothing much, child, go on.

Neoptolemus

Are you in pain – your old illness?

Philoctetes

Oh no. I feel better now, I think –

Gods!

⁸ Lessing 1984: 24–5/2012:30–1.

⁹ See Jebb 1898 on *Philoctetes* 1422: ‘ek ton ponon tond’ euklea thesthai bion’: ‘*ek*, not merely “after” (720), but “as a result of,” “through.”’.

Neoptolemus

Why are you groaning and calling on the gods?

Philoctetes

To come gently to me and save me –

Ahh ahh!

Neoptolemus

Whatever's wrong? Speak, don't keep quiet!

You're clearly suffering terribly.

Philoctetes

It's killing me, child, I can't hide this evil

from you, oh ohh! It's shooting through me,

shooting through me – oh, wretched, miserable me!

It's killing me, child, it's eating me up, oh oh!

oh oh oh ohh! oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh!

For the gods' sake, if you have a sword, child

take it and hack at my ankle,

cut it off right away, come, child, don't spare my life.

S. Ph. 732–50

These inarticulate cries of pain had, moreover, furnished the starting-point of Lessing's criticisms of Winckelmann in Chapter 1 of *Laocoon*. There, Lessing had cited 'The laments, the cries, the wild curses with which his anguish filled the camp and interrupted all the sacrifices and sacred rites [and which] resounded no less terribly through the desert island' in order to launch his refutation of Winckelmann's statement, illustrated by a carelessly drawn parallel between the marble Laocoon and the Sophoclean hero, that Greek heroism *in general* was characterised by silent endurance.¹⁰ Even before Winckelmann, Sophocles' presentation of the suffering Philoctetes had already made that hero – along with the Heracles of the *Trachiniae* and the Oedipus of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* – into a topos of early modern debates over tragic decorum. The supposedly 'simple' and 'natural' speech of Sophocles' suffering heroes was cited by critics who sought to move away from the conventionalised and elegant verbal and gestural expression of high French classical tragedy in the mode of Corneille and Racine. Fénelon, for example, had praised the final scene of the *Oedipus* in his *Lettre sur les occupations de l'Académie* of 1714 as presenting 'Nature's own cry as she surrenders to pain', commending 'the same lively, simple pain' expressed by Heracles and Philoctetes. Diderot used the same examples in his *Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel* of 1757.¹¹ By the time Lessing came to write the *Laocoon* both French authors had

¹⁰ 'Laocoon suffers, but he suffers like the Philoctetes of Sophocles; his anguish pierces our very soul, but at the same time we wish that we were able to endure our suffering as well as this great man does.' Winckelmann 1755, cited and discussed in Lessing 1984: 7–8/2012: 11–12.

¹¹ 'C'est ainsi que parle la nature, quand elle succombe à la douleur: jamais rien ne fut plus éloigné des phrases brillantes du bel esprit. Hercule et Philoctète parlent avec la même douleur vive et simple dans Sophocle' (Fénelon 1845: 60); 'Je ne laisserai point de crier à nos Français: la Vérité! La Nature! Les Anciens! Sophocle! Philoctète!' (Diderot 1980: 116). See Burwick 1991: 42–61, Worvill 2005: 53, 82.

been received into German theoretical discussions: Gottsched had translated Fénelon's dramatic writings in the first volume of his *Deutsche Schaubühne* of 1741 and Lessing himself produced a two-volume translation of Diderot's dramatic writings in 1760 under the title *Das Theater des Herrn Diderots*.¹²

Aspects of Lessing's treatment of Sophocles in *Laocoon*'s opening chapters are reminiscent of the earlier French debates. He declares that Philoctetes' cries are 'the natural expression of physical pain' and compares the natural self-expression of Homeric heroes favourably with the restrained propriety of 'we more refined Europeans of a wiser, later age'.¹³ The many contrasts he draws between Sophocles' treatment and the contemporary *Philoctète* of Jean-Baptiste Chateaubrun, in which the ancient dramatist always comes off the better, also mark Lessing's arguments as an intervention in this particular chapter of the *Querelle*.¹⁴ Their concern with questions of convention and decorum in theatrical representation also marks these chapters as a continuation of the theoretical discussions about tragic drama that Lessing had carried on with Mendelssohn and Nicolai in 1756–7. Romira Worvill has explored how the different positions advanced by the three correspondents in the so-called *Briefwechsel über das Trauerspiel* are complex, with each endorsing elements of both 'progressive' and 'traditional' (i.e. neoclassical) points of view.¹⁵ While Mendelssohn's position on the end of tragedy – that it should provide virtuous models for emulation – appears traditional in the face of both Nicolai's du Bos- and de Piles-inflected claim that tragedy aims to arouse strong emotions and Lessing's subordination of admiration to pity, his overall understanding of drama as an ensemble which combines language, gesture and staging to make a 'living representation' ('lebendige Vorstellung'), which aims at 'illusion', represents a modernising advance on Lessing's more conventional treatment of drama as essentially a genre of poetic speech.¹⁶ In *Laocoon*, Chapter 4, Lessing's qualification of dramatic poetry as 'designed for living representation by the actor' ('für die lebendige Mahlerey des Schauspielers bestimmt') echoes Mendelssohn's formulation from the *Briefwechsel*; his concerns with the interaction of Philoctetes and the other onstage characters, and with the difficulty any actor would face in 'carry[ing] his presentation of physical pain to the point of illusion' ('bis zur Illusion') suggest that the terms in which he is considering drama have expanded from the heavily literary perspective of the *Briefwechsel*.¹⁷

¹² Diderot's dramatic theories were particularly attractive to Lessing, who viewed them as providing support and encouragement to the more realistic modes of language and gesture pioneered in the 'bourgeois' tragedy *Miss Sara Sampson* (1755) and developed further in *Emilia Galotti* (1772). On Diderot's influence on Lessing's dramaturgy see Nisbet 2013: 270–4 and especially Worvill 2005.

¹³ 'High as Homer raises his heroes above human nature in other respects, he still has them remain faithful to it in their sensitiveness to pain and injury and in the expression of this feeling by cries, tears, or invectives. In their deeds they are beings of a higher order, in their feelings true men.' Lessing 1984: 8–9/2012: 12–13.

¹⁴ Lessing 1984: 11, 25–32/2012: 14–15, 32–42. As both Nisbet (2013: 275–7) and Vollhardt (2013: 188–90) note, these sections derive from Lessing's earlier and abandoned project to produce a German-language edition of Sophocles' plays. Nisbet states that Lessing intended to present Sophocles as 'a theatre reformer who overcame the *Schwulst* (bombastic or inflated style) of Aeschylus, replacing it with authentic sublimity and tragic fear with no need for exaggerated effects' (2013: 276). The canonical elements of this portrait, in which Sophocles takes over certain characteristics from the Euripides of Aristophanes' *Frogs*, should not obscure its character as a foil for Lessing's own theatrical priorities. More generally on Lessing's engagements with ancient drama (including Sophocles), see Korzeniewski 2003. On the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*, see the introduction to this volume.

¹⁵ Worvill 2005: 145. On the unsystematic character of the *Briefwechsel*, which was never intended by its authors for publication, see Martinec 2013: 120–1.

¹⁶ Worvill 2005: 145–56; see too Burwick 1991: 83–94.

¹⁷ Lessing 1985: 24/2012: 31; see Worvill 2005: 163–4.

In numerous ways, then, the opening of *Laocoon* shows Lessing's continuing concern with questions of dramatic language and staging. Yet such questions do not form his primary focus in Chapter 4. His central question there is whether a hero such as Philoctetes, whose suffering is primarily corporeal, makes a fit subject for tragedy; and in the passage quoted above Lessing suggests that an objection arises because of a theory which holds that *in general*, the spectacle of extreme physical pain is unsuited to arousing pity among the spectators. It was from precisely this theoretical position that Smith had criticised Greek tragic heroes in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

In some of the Greek tragedies there is an attempt to excite compassion, by the representation of the agonies of bodily pain. Philoctetes cries out and faints from the extremity of his sufferings. Hippolytus and Hercules are both introduced as expiring under the severest tortures, which, it seems, even the fortitude of Hercules was incapable of supporting... These attempts to excite compassion by the representation of bodily pain, may be regarded as among the greatest breaches of decorum of which the Greek theatre has set the example.¹⁸

And it is as the proponent of this view that Lessing quotes directly from Smith shortly afterwards:

... [L]et us turn to those scenes in which Philoctetes no longer appears as the abandoned sick man, but has hopes of leaving the bleak desert island and returning to his kingdom; that is to say, in those scenes where his entire misfortune is restricted to his painful wound. He moans, he shrieks, he falls into the most horrible convulsions. It is against this that the objection of offended decorum is justly raised; it is an Englishman [i.e. Smith] who makes the objection – a man, therefore, not readily suspected of false delicacy. And as indicated, he gives very good reasons for his objection. All feelings and passions, he says, for which others can find but little sympathy become offensive if too violently expressed. “For this reason nothing is more indecent and unmanly than weeping and crying out with physical pain however intolerable it may be. But there is, to be sure, a sympathy for physical pain. When we see that someone is about to receive a blow on his arm or shin, we naturally start and draw back our own arm or leg, and if the blow actually falls, we too feel it in some measure and are hurt by it as well as the sufferer. However, our actual pain is very slight, and so when the person who is struck cries out violently we are invariably contemptuous of him since we are not able to cry as violently as he.”¹⁹

Lessing's statement that it is here that a *substantive* objection on grounds of decency may be raised ('Hierwider gehet *eigentlich* der Einwurf des beleidigten Anstandes', emphasis mine) distinguishes the *ethical* objection of 'der Engländer' from the 'falsche Delicatesse' of neoclassical French critics.²⁰ Rather than the traditional question of the register of tragic language, it is the more

¹⁸ Smith 2002: 37 (TMS I.ii.I.11).

¹⁹ Lessing 1985: 27–8/2012: 37–8, quoting TMS I.ii.I.5 (Lessing uses the second edition of 1761).

²⁰ See too Lessing's distinction between 'a merely conventional sense of propriety' and 'one that is grounded in the very nature of our feelings' in the first passage from Chapter 4 quoted in this section (1985: 24–5/2012: 31). The distinction between a sense of propriety that is 'bloß willkürlich' and one that is 'in dem Wesen unsrer

specifically Smithian question of the fitness of spectacles of physical suffering to arouse sympathy with which Lessing is concerned.

Lessing will, of course, disagree with Smith on the success of the *Philoctetes* as tragedy: he goes on to claim that Sophocles' play is one of the 'masterpieces of the stage'.²¹ But although Lessing disagrees with Smith overall it is remarkable how many of Smith's criticisms he adopts. Lessing's defence of Sophocles reveals him to have been a careful reader of Smith and who was willing to concede many points of Smith's argument. The next section of this paper sets out why Smith held that violent expressions of bodily suffering were offensive. It then examines Lessing's counter-arguments in order to show how many points of Smith's criticisms are taken over in Lessing's response.

SMITH'S ARGUMENTS ABOUT SYMPATHY AND LESSING'S REPLY

It is unsurprising that Lessing should have proved an enthusiastic reader of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The work was first published in 1759, three years after the appearance of Lessing's translation of Hutcheson's *System of Moral Philosophy* and the aforementioned correspondence with Nicolai and Mendelssohn, in which Lessing had defended the position that the proper end of tragedy was to increase its audience's moral sensitivity by exercising their capacity for pity.²² The *Theory of Moral Sentiments* would have interested Lessing for at least two reasons. First, it provides an extended and highly insightful exploration of the nature and workings of pity. Smith's starting-point is 'pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a lively manner'; once this is extended into an analysis of 'sympathy' – a term Smith introduces 'to denote our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever' – it is fundamental to his theories of moral approbation and judgement.²³ Second, Smith was as interested as Lessing in the question of the contribution of sympathy to harmonious moral and social co-existence. For Smith, 'to feel much for others and little for ourselves, to restrain our selfish, and to indulge our benevolent affections, constitutes the perfection of human nature; and can alone produce among mankind that harmony of sentiments and passions in which consists their whole grace and propriety'.²⁴ Smith is, however, little concerned with aesthetic questions *per se*. He brings up the *Philoctetes* as an illustration within a more general argument about how moral approbation functions. His objection to *Philoctetes* stems from two aspects of his moral psychology: his claim that sympathy involves an act of

Empfindungen selbst gegründet' corresponds to the distinction between neoclassical French critics of Sophocles and Smith.

²¹ Lessing 1985: 25/2012: 31.

²² Martinec 2008 doubts Lessing's authorship of the Hutcheson translation.

²³ Smith 2002: 11, 13 (*TMS* I.i.1, 5).

²⁴ Smith 2002: 30 (*TMS* I.i.V.5). There are further reasons why Smith might have proved attractive to Lessing as he continued to develop his thoughts on the nature of pity and its role in aesthetic response. Smith appears usefully indifferent to the debates over nature and culture which had governed discussions of sympathy up to this point. *TMS* begins *in medias res*, with the claim that 'How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it'. Smith thus eschews the question of the origin of sympathy in favour of a close and subtle description of its operations: a pragmatic and inductive mode of proceeding which may have appealed to Lessing the dramatist and critic. Smith also praises moderation in the expression of passions while disapproving of extreme Stoic fortitude: a position which accords to some extent with Lessing's dramatic theory and practice. See Heidsieck 1983.

simulative imagination, and the distinction he draws between the ‘passions which take their origin from the body’ and those which depend on the imagination.

On the first of these topics, it is illuminating to draw a contrast between Smith and his friend and philosophical correspondent, David Hume. In his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume had put forward a conception of sympathy as working via the transfer or ‘communication’ of passions from one agent to another.²⁵ Smith, by contrast, holds that insofar as human beings can come to feel the emotions of others it is by dint of their ability to imagine themselves in the other’s position – what he calls ‘changing places in fancy with the sufferer’.²⁶ Thus, in the extended example of ‘our brother on the rack’, with which Smith opens his discussion in *TMS*, he insists that

as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations.²⁷

This emphasis on the role of imagination and the consequent importance of the ‘vivacity or dulness of the conception’ an agent is able to form of another’s distress aligns Smith’s discussion more easily than Hume’s with the outlook of German rationalist aesthetics, which is similarly concerned with questions of the clarity of mental representations.²⁸ But Smith also argues that it is easier to perform such acts of the imagination in some cases than in others. In instances of physical pain, for example, or hunger, where the ‘passion’ observed is of a kind ‘which arise from a certain situation or disposition of the body’, he maintains that observers, ‘not being in the same disposition, cannot be expected to sympathise with them’. The imagination, however, ‘is more ductile, and more readily assumes... the shape and configuration of the imaginations of those with whom I am familiar.’ If, therefore, an observer witnesses another’s fear, say, or ‘disappointment in love, or ambition’, sympathy flows more readily.²⁹

We might well question the grounds for this distinction – is it really so much harder to sympathize with another’s hunger, say, than their fear? Smith’s illustrations are indeed hedged around with qualifications. In the passage Lessing quotes, Smith’s claim that ‘nothing is more indecent and unmanly than weeping and crying out with physical pain however intolerable it may be’ is followed immediately by a reservation:

There is, however, a good deal of sympathy even with bodily pain. If, as has already been observed, I see a stroke aimed, and just ready to fall upon the leg, or arm, of another person, I naturally shrink and draw back my own leg, or my own arm: and when it does fall, I feel it in some measure, and am hurt by it as well as the sufferer. My hurt, however,

²⁵ ‘A chearful countenance infuses a sensible complacency and serenity into my mind; as an angry or sorrowful one throws a sudden damp upon me. Hatred, resentment, esteem, love, courage, mirth and melancholy; all these passions I feel more from communication than from my own natural temper and disposition.’ (Hume 1978: 317). The detailed debate over the mechanisms of sympathetic communication according to the Humean psychology of ideas and impressions falls outside the scope of this paper.

²⁶ Smith 2002: 12 (*TMS* I.i.1.3).

²⁷ Smith 2002: 11 (*TMS* I.i.1.2).

²⁸ Nisbet 2013: 316–8, Wellbery 1984: 9–42.

²⁹ Smith 2002: 35 (*TMS* I.ii.1.6).

is, no doubt, excessively slight, and, upon that account, if he makes any violent out-cry, as I cannot go along with him, I cannot fail to despise him.³⁰

Lessing's discussion shows him to have a fairly fine grasp of the niceties of Smith's psychology. Significantly, his 'defence' of Sophocles here falls far short of a refutation of Smith's views. Lessing makes four arguments in defence of the propriety of Sophocles' handling of his hero's physical suffering. In three of them he defends the *Philoctetes* not on the grounds of spectacles of extreme physical pain's intrinsic suitability to arouse a theatre audience's sympathy, but in terms of how Sophocles has managed to overcome this weakness inherent in his chosen theme.

Lessing directs our attention first to the skill with which Sophocles has 'enlarged and extended' the idea of Philoctetes' physical pain. He did so by making the subject of his play a hero who had been wounded, rather than afflicted by some less obvious disease, 'because sickness, no matter how painful, cannot impress us as much as a wound'.³¹ Far from providing a refutation of Smith this is almost a quotation, for Smith had maintained that: 'We conceive in a much more likely and distinct manner, the pain which proceeds from an external cause, than we do that which arises from an internal disorder. I can scarce form an idea of the agonies of my neighbour when he is tortured with the gout, or the stone; but I have the clearest conception of what he must suffer from an incision, a wound, or a fracture.'³²

Lessing's second point is likewise very close to something Smith himself says.

However great and terrible he made the physical pain of his hero, Sophocles still knew full well that it was in itself not enough to excite any appreciable degree of pity. He therefore combined it with other ills which likewise could not in themselves greatly move us, but which receive from this combination a coloring just as melancholy as that to which they in their turn impart to physical pain. These ills were complete isolation from human society, hunger, and all the hardships of life to which one is exposed in a state of privation and in a raw climate.³³

Here Lessing emphasises Sophocles' brilliance in combining Philoctetes' physical degradation with other deprivations which, considered together with his wound, render him pitiful. Some of these ('hunger') are likewise pains of the body, while others, such as the loneliness attendant upon 'complete isolation from human society' are what Smith would have termed pains of the imagination. Yet Smith too had suggested that 'It is not the sore foot, but the solitude, of Philoctetes which affects us, and diffuses over that charming tragedy, that romantic wildness, which is so agreeable to the imagination'. Lessing does place the balance a little more evenly, suggesting that the challenges of isolation alone would create a Robinson Crusoe figure, rather than a spectacle of pity. This does not significantly affect the overall point that, as Smith puts it, 'In all these cases... it is not the pain which interests us, but some other circumstance.'³⁴

³⁰ Smith 2002: 35 (*TMS* I.ii.I.5). This is the text of the first edition; Smith's wording changes slightly in subsequent editions.

³¹ Lessing 1985: 25/2012: 31–2.

³² Smith 2002: 36–7 (*TMS* I.ii.I.10).

³³ Lessing 1985: 26/2012: 32–3.

³⁴ Smith 2002: 37 (*TMS* I.ii.I.11).

Even the fourth point of Lessing's defence does little to take up the argument where it would need to be taken up to counter Smith: the idea that witnessing Philoctetes' physical suffering would in and of itself prompt a sympathetic reaction from the spectators:

Sophocles was not content simply to secure his sensitive Philoctetes from all contempt: he has at the same time forestalled all adverse criticism based on the remarks of the Englishman. For though we are not always contemptuous of the man who cries out under physical pain, it is an indisputable fact that we do not feel as much pity for him as his cry would seem to demand. How then should those who are with the screaming Philoctetes conduct themselves? Should they pretend to be deeply moved? That would be contrary to nature. Should they appear cold and embarrassed, as one actually tends to be in such a situation? That would create a most unpleasant dissonance in the mind of the spectator.³⁵

Note first the Smithian: even if the spectators do not utterly despise a hero who gives full expression to his physical suffering, their sympathy is unlikely to be commensurate with his expression of feelings. Their enjoyment of the play will therefore be interrupted by 'a most unpleasant dissonance', as they disapprove of the lack of self-control that has led to him rolling and writhing around the stage. Lessing argues that Sophocles averts this possibility by creating other points of interest for his audience: their attention is held by the moral dilemma facing Neoptolemus (who must decide whether or not to take advantage of Philoctetes' incapacity to make off with his bow) and the reversal to come.³⁶ This again amounts to arguing that the audience is diverted from the problematic spectacle of Philoctetes' corporeal suffering, rather than defending it as a sight itself suited to arousing pity.

It is Lessing's third argument that is the most interesting, and provides his most substantial response to Smith's censures. Immediately following his long and apparently concessive quotation of Smith, he comments:

Nothing is more deceptive than the laying down of general laws for our emotions. Their texture is so delicate and intricate that even the most cautious speculation can hardly pick out a single thread and follow it through all its interlacing. But even if such speculation were to succeed, what could we gain by it? In nature there are no single, unmixed emotions; with each one thousands of others spring up at the same time, and the least of these is able to change the original feeling completely, so that one exception after another arises until the supposedly general law itself is finally reduced to a mere personal experience in some individual cases. We despise a man, says the Englishman, whom we hear cry out violently under physical pain. But not always; not the first time; not when we see that the sufferer is making every effort to suppress it; not when we know him to be a man of firmness in other respects; and less when we see him offer proofs of his steadfastness even while suffering; when we see that his pain can force him to cry out but not go one single step further than that; when we see that he would rather submit to a continuation of his pain than change his way of thinking or his resolve in the slightest

³⁵ Lessing 1985: 30/2012: 40.

³⁶ Lessing 1985: 30–1/2012: 40–1.

degree, even though he knows that such a change would end suffering altogether. We find all this in the case of Philoctetes.³⁷

This passage should be sufficient to temper any interpretation of Lessing in *Laocoon* as despising endurance and fortitude in the tragic hero. Despite Chapter 1's blunt statement that 'Stoicism is not dramatic' ('Alles Stoische ist untheatralisch'), and the distaste for the cold, Senecan tragedy of admiration displayed in Chapter 4, Lessing praises Sophocles' Philoctetes for his 'steadfastness' ('Standhaftigkeit') and for making the greatest possible effort to stifle his pain.³⁸ Lessing's claim that no 'single' ('einzeln') and 'unadulterated' ('rein') emotions occur in nature recalls the December 1756 letter to Mendelssohn in which he had outlined a view of tragic pity as a hybrid emotion that combines admiration for a hero's perfections and pain at his misfortunes.³⁹ This section of Lessing's argument testifies yet again to his continuing concern with the arguments about tragedy's emotional and ethical effects worked out in the 1756–7 correspondence on tragedy.

But it also reveals an element in Lessing's thinking about the workings of tragic pity which is significant in the light of his direction of argument in *Laocoon*'s second half. For, although Lessing appears in this passage to insist on the instantaneous ('zugleich') occurrence of the varied emotions that go to make up the audience's overall response, his analysis of how the theatre audience comes to sympathize with Philoctetes' suffering invokes their appreciation of the characteristic actions and passions of the hero as they have developed across the play's preceding episodes. The sympathy the spectators feel for Philoctetes as he writhes in agony is a response to the situation he is in at that moment: extreme physical pain, so great that he can no longer stifle its expression. But they respond with sympathy, rather than (as Smith might predict) contempt, because of their enlarged understanding of the character and situation of the man who is suffering such agonies before their very eyes. They react to Philoctetes not simply as *a* man in the throes of pain, but as *this* particular hero in his unique predicament, who has endured what Philoctetes has endured and is still subject to a terrible deception. In short, Lessing suggests that the audience's sympathetic response to Philoctetes' sufferings is dependent upon the kind of narrative understanding of action over time which, Lessing suggests elsewhere in the *Laocoon*, is the province of the poet rather than the visual artist.

Some comments Smith makes about sympathy show the potential for his analysis to be developed in this direction. In the course of his gentle correction of Hume's discussion of sympathy's workings he goes so far as to state that 'Sympathy... does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it.'⁴⁰ This 'view of... the situation' is particularly important in the case of what Smith terms the 'unsocial passions', such as anger

³⁷ Lessing 1985: 28–9/2012: 38.

³⁸ Lessing 1985: 11, 29–30/2012: 15, 38.

³⁹ 'Ein großes Mitleiden kann nicht ohne große Vollkommenheiten in dem Gegenstande des Mitleids sein, und große Vollkommenheiten, sinnlich ausgedrückt, nicht ohne Bewunderung. Aber diese großen Vollkommenheiten sollen in dem Trauerspiele nie ohne große Unglücksfälle sein, sollen mit diesen allezeit genau verbunden sein, und sollen also nicht Bewunderung allein, sondern Bewunderung und Schmerz, das ist, Mitleiden erwecken. Und das ist meine Meinung. Die Bewunderung findet also in dem Trauerspiele nicht als ein besonderer Affekt Statt, sondern bloß als die Hälfte des Mitleids' (Lessing to Mendelssohn, 18 December 1756, in Lessing 1972: 77). Lessing would return to the elaboration of tragic pity as a 'vermischte Empfindung' in numbers 74–78 of the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*. See Lessing 1999: 378–402, see especially 381–2.

⁴⁰ Smith 2002: 15 (*TMS* I.i.10).

and hatred, where the immediate sympathy of a spectator who has not been informed of all the facts of the case might flow towards the object, rather than the agent, of the negative emotion.⁴¹ In Chapter 4 of *Laocoon* Lessing extends this insight in a manner that implicitly favours poetry over painting. For the extended elaboration of context that Sophocles' dramatic masterpiece as a whole provides can transform a particular moment or episode of behaviour which, considered by itself, may seem improper into one element of a more complex and sympathetic overall response to the suffering hero.

STRUCTURE, NOT SPECTACLE: THE CONTINUING AUTHORITY OF ARISTOTLE

The essential elements of Lessing's response to Smith are therefore already presented in the words he uses to describe the 'province' of poetry at the start of Chapter 4:

[T]here is nothing to compel the poet to compress his picture into a single moment. He may, if he so chooses, take up each action at its origin and pursue it through all possible variations to its end. Each variation which would cost the artist a separate work costs the poet but a single pen stroke; and if the result of this pen stroke, viewed by itself, should offend the hearer's imagination, it was either anticipated by what has preceded or is so softened and compensated by what follows that it loses its individual impression and in combination achieves the best effect in the world.⁴²

It is poetry's ability to present complex actions extending over time that allows the audience to respond to Philoctetes not as a contemptible coward but as a steadfastly suffering hero. In this manner, the 'disordered' musings on tragedy with which Lessing opens *Laocoon* both anticipate and confirm the analytical–deductive presentation of the essay's second half.

This understanding of poetic action as consisting in a temporally extended but unified complex of individual moments is, however, a more developed notion than the abstract characterisation with which Lessing opens his deductive presentation. Several commentators have explored how Chapter 16's definition of actions as 'Objects or parts of objects which follow one another [in time]' ('Gegenstände, die auf einander, oder deren Theile auf einander folgen') fails to do justice to the causally connected sequences of individual movements (Pandarus' stringing of his bow, Hebe's yoking of horses to Hera's chariot) Lessing gives as examples of 'actions' in the paragraphs that follow, nor even to the distinction between 'progressive' and 'stationary' actions contemplated and set aside at the end of the preceding chapter.⁴³ As Daniel Fulda discusses in this volume, passages from Lessing's drafts for *Laocoon* reveal him at one point to have been working with what Fulda terms a 'richer' notion of action than we find in the published version of Chapter 16. At an analogous point of argument in a draft from 1763, Lessing defines an action as 'a series of movements that aim at a final purpose' ('Eine Reihe von Bewegungen, die auf einen Endzweck abzielen, heißt eine *Handlung*'); a later draft talks of 'the ideal of [poetic]

⁴¹ Smith 2002: 42–7 (*TMS* I.ii.III).

⁴² Lessing 1984: 24–5/2012: 29–30.

⁴³ In addition to [Fulda in this volume](#), see Rudowski 1967, Wessell 1984, Nisbet 2013: 319–20.

action’ as consisting in ‘1) the compression of time 2) the heightening of incitements and the exclusion of chance; and 3) the arousal of passions’.⁴⁴

Fulda notes that this conception of an action ‘relies heavily on Aristotle’s requirements for dramatic action’. Lessing’s strictures as to the length, perspicuity of causal connection, and emotional effect of an ideal poetic action indeed echo key features of Aristotle’s stipulations for the construction of tragic plots in *Poetics* VI–XI. In Aristotle’s discussion, however, the first two conditions are emphasized for the sake of the third. Tragic plots should be restricted in magnitude and should present a clearly connected sequence of events because by doing so they will provide the clearest possible representation of the kind of transformation ‘from bad fortune to good fortune, or from good to bad’ that Aristotle holds to be optimal for the arousal of the properly tragic emotions of pity and fear:

To define the matter simply: that magnitude long enough to allow for a transformation from good fortune to bad fortune or bad to good, in a sequence of events that follow on from each other in accordance with probability or necessity, is a sufficient limit of magnitude.⁴⁵

Insofar as Lessing’s adoption of Aristotelian formal restrictions in this draft of *Laocoon* is sensitive to the reasoning behind Aristotle’s prescriptions, these sections suggest that his enumeration of the ideal formal characteristics of poetic representations of actions is also framed by a concern with how to achieve tragedy’s proper emotional effect.

Even if such a concern is detectable in Lessing’s early drafts, this does not exclude the possibility that such questions had ceased to matter to him by the time he published Part 1 of *Laocoon*. Although the slightly later *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* attests to Lessing’s continuing concern to erect his defence of a tragedy of pity on Aristotelian foundations, his principal focus there is the contested notion of *catharsis* rather than the Aristotelian discussion of plot. There is, however, one further piece of evidence to suggest that the Aristotelian understanding of tragic action continued to occupy Lessing’s thoughts. In the May 1769 letter to Nicolai in which he outlines *Laocoon*’s intended continuation, he again invokes the authority of the *Poetics*. Just after naming drama ‘the highest kind of poetry’ because it ‘turns the arbitrary signs wholly into natural signs’, he comments:

⁴⁴ Lessing 1990: 251, 260 (Drafts 5 and 8 in the standard numbering of the *Paralipomena*); see section V of Fulda in this volume. For a concise reconstruction of *Laocoon*’s genesis, see Nisbet 2013: 304–06.

⁴⁵ Arist. *Po.* VII, 1451a11–15 Chapter VII. Aristotle justifies the preference for a plot that provokes pity and fear through a transformation or variation (‘metabasis/metabole/metaballein’) which arises from the structure of events, rather than through chance or mere spectacle, in Chapters IX and XIII–XIV. Note Lessing’s similar emphasis on transformation or ‘variation’ in action (‘Abänderung’) in passage from the beginning of *Laocoon*, Chapter 4 quoted at the start of this section. In their respective commentaries on the paralipomena to *Laocoon*, neither Barner nor Vollhardt observes how far Lessing’s discussion in this section (VIII) of Draft 8 is reminiscent of *Poetics* VII. In that chapter, Aristotle draws on an analogy between the well-constructed plot and the visible beauty of a physical object (animal or artefact) to argue that both manifest appropriate principles of magnitude and order in the arrangements of parts. In the case of the physical object this magnitude and order are spatial, but in the tragic plot (so Aristotle implies) they are temporal (1450b33–1451a15). In *Paralipomena* 8.VIII, Lessing likewise appeals to an analogy between ‘Schönheit’ as ‘der malerische Wert der Körper’ and ‘das Ideal der moralischen Vollkommenheit in der Poesie’ (1990: 260). The mention of ‘moralische Vollkommenheit’ suggests moreover that Lessing’s description of the ideal form of poetic action is (like Aristotle’s) informed by concern with its ethical effects.

Aristotle already declared that dramatic poetry is the highest, indeed the only poetry, and he puts epic poetry into second place only insofar as it is, or can be, to a large extent dramatic. The reason he gives for this is not mine, it is true; but it can be reduced to mine, and only reducing it to mine ensures it against being applied falsely.⁴⁶

Commentary on this letter has tended to focus upon what Lessing says about the *media* of dramatic representation ('natural signs of arbitrary things'), attempting to elucidate his comments by reference to the concept of a 'suitable relation' introduced to motivate the move from medium to object of representation in *Laocoon*, Chapter 16.⁴⁷ Yet if Lessing's sole intention in the envisaged continuation were to elaborate a formal semiotics of drama by comparison with other genres of poetry, his reference to Aristotle here would be puzzling. For, although the *Poetics* does include observations about the media (speech, rhythm, melody) and modes (narration versus dramatic impersonation) employed by various genres of poetry, these are given a lower priority than plot and in any case prove insufficient to distinguish tragedy from Homeric epic.⁴⁸ It is in relation to the construction of plot – the feature he terms 'the beginning and soul' of poetic mimesis – that Aristotle commends epic only insofar as it approximates the character of drama: that is, insofar as it is constructed 'around a single, whole and complete action, with a beginning, middle and end, so that, like a single, whole living thing, it may produce its proper pleasure'.⁴⁹ Yet again, apparently formal restrictions concerning the unity and connection of poetic action are framed by the overall question of how forms such as tragedy or epic bring about their emotional effects.

It is hardly surprising that Lessing, who wrote from a dramatist's perspective and was steeped in both ancient and modern poetic theory, should have brought a detailed engagement with Sophocles and Aristotle to bear in responding to Smith's criticisms. His claim that the poet's currency of temporally extended action enables him to soften and modify the negative impressions of the moment provides a genuine addition to Smith's theorising on sympathy as a moral sentiment. As we have seen, it also provides a bridge between the *Laocoon*'s famous formal distinctions and Lessing's earlier and later explicit concern with the dynamics of tragic pity. For pity as aroused by dramatic representations of action is reliant upon structure that is progressive in time.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Lessing to Nicolai, 26 May 1769, in Lessing 1987: 610/Nisbet 1985: 134.

⁴⁷ See for example Wellbery 1984: 226–7; Beiser 2011: 275–7; Nisbet 2013: 325–6, and Lifschitz's chapter in this book.

⁴⁸ Arist. *Po.* III, 1448a18–23; see too IV, 1448b33–1449a1; XXIV, 1460a5–11.

⁴⁹ Arist. *Po.* XXIII, 1459a16–20. On the analogy between a poem and a living thing (*zōon*), which refers back to the analogy between poetry and physical objects drawn at 1450b33–1451a15, see n. 45 above.

⁵⁰ In addition to the conference discussions in Göttingen, the argument of this paper is informed by an understanding of historical and philosophical debates about sympathy developed over meetings of the Interdisciplinary Network on Sympathy/Empathy and Imagination. Thanks are owed to my INSEI collaborators and to the British Academy and Leverhulme Trust for funding this network. I also thank seminar audiences in London and Oxford who listened to early drafts, and Avi Lifschitz and Michael Squire for inviting me to contribute to the conference and volume.