



In Tragic Life

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In the reviews thus far of the Manchester book on Kennedy's death I have missed what strikes me as the crucial question: whether it rises to the tragic dimensions of the whole story, if indeed its essence was tragic.

Oh, there are tension and terror aplenty: reliving the event becomes as intolerable as the original living of it was. Partly it is because the terror builds up as the foreknown event approaches. But mainly, I suspect, it is because we are not offered a way of purging ourselves of the pity and terror in the traditional mode of tragedy. There is only a feeling of the terrible waste of talent and greatness, the senseless futility of it.

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Mrs. Kennedy came close to the core problem when she kept hoping that Oswald would turn out to have been part of a larger conspiracy: "for then (as Manchester puts it) there would be an air of inevitability about the tragedy . . . What was terrible was the thought that it had been an accident, a freak."

One gathers from Manchester's book that he does consider it to have been "an accident, a freak." The only elements he describes as building up toward the event were the climate of Radical Right hate in the Texas "nut country," and Kennedy's desire to repair Democratic political fences in Texas. Put the picture of Oswald as the man who felt ignored by the world and scorned by his wife, and whose mind cracked the evening before the murder when Marina again rejected him—such a picture has nothing to do with either the climate of Radical Right hatred or with the need for fencemending.

Manchester presents Oswald as an isolated datum, not only without accomplices but even without political convictions, using Marxism only as a cloak for his inner frustrations. By this version, if Marina had been kinder to her husband that evening, he would not have cracked, and Kennedy would be alive today. It is a "Cleopatra's nose" theory of history and a cut-rate amateur psychoanalyst's theory of tragedy.

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Was there another way of getting at the tragic dimension of Kennedy's death? I think there was, but it would have required a different view of both Kennedy and Johnson, and of Oswald as well.

If you see Kennedy as the victim of blind chance his death differs from that of any victim of a sniper's bullet only because his loss was so much greater and affected so many more lives. What is "tragic" in such a case is the loss, the waste, the feeling of helplessness to avert it or to resolve it. Hence the lines from Whitman's poem on Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed," which he uses as an epigraph: "O powerful, western, fallen star! . . . O cruel hands that hold me powerless." The star has fallen, the night has come, the cloud will not dispel "and free my soul." The fact that one is helpless to save the victim does not make tragedy.

Another poet may give us more of a clue to the Kennedy tragedy. It is George Meredith, in his sonnet sequence, "Modern Love": "In tragic life, God wot, passions spin the plot." The passions that were involved in Kennedy's death were what made it tragic. One does little service to Kennedy's memory to see him as a kind of Camelot golden boy, struck down in his golden moment, with only darkness as the result. He was a hardbitten tough-minded man who had been through some fiery furnaces. He had learned how to take it, as at the Bay of Pigs, and how to dish it out, as at the later Cuban missile confrontation. He was not killed for his civil rights stand, yet he was committed to carrying through on that issue and he knew it might make him a target, just as he must have known his up-and-down policies toward Castro might. But he went on nonetheless: that, and not just political fence-mending in Texas, was the passion that

moved him.

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There were passions at work also in Oswald's life and mind. He was not just a pathetic little man who couldn't keep a job and whose wife spurned him. The winds of change and the fermenting ideas in the world had produced Oswald's mind as surely as they had produced Kennedy's. He didn't just mouth Marxian slogans: even when he misunderstood them, as he did, they gave some meaning to his life. He was both a misfit and revolutionary—and each fed the other. He had seen Russia and decided they were not true revolutionists; he may have felt the same way about Castro. He had to feel that he was a purer and truer revolutionary than anyone else, and that he could—despite all the Establishments of the world, including Kennedy's—move and change history.

These were the passions that were spinning the plot, not in abstraction, not in universe of wild chance, but in the very midst of tragic life. Kennedy died at the point where his own low-keyed but none the less insistent passions converged with the wild ones that possessed Oswald. And just as his moment was not all golden, so his death was not followed (as Manchester would have us believe) by protracted night. It doesn't enhance Kennedy's stature, but diminishes it, to imply that the impact of his work ended when he died. Lyndon Johnson, with a very non-Camelot political style, nevertheless carried on (especially in his domestic program) in continuity with Kennedy's hardbitten idealism.

The tragedy lay not in the shots but in the way the nation transcended them. That is why the truly tragic brings not only a sense of loss, but with it a sense of the enhancement of life.