

KATHARSIS AS CLARIFICATION: AN OBJECTION ANSWERED

IN the Introduction to her recent translation of the *Poetics*, Miss Hubbard astutely recognizes the intellectual orientation of Aristotle's aesthetic theory.¹ She observes that for Aristotle the concept of *mimesis* is intimately connected with that of *mathesis* and thus that the basic pleasure of art is the intellectual pleasure involved in learning. She then correctly identifies two levels of the learning process involved in *mimesis*: on a lower level it signifies the way in which children learn their first lessons but on a much more sophisticated plane it denotes a process by which our understanding of 'moral facts and moral possibilities' is deepened. She perceptively concludes that if art is to achieve the goal set for it by Aristotle, it must have a significant relationship to ultimate truth.

I have argued elsewhere that the points made by Miss Hubbard as well as a number of additional reasons indicate that Aristotle's doctrine of *katharsis* is best understood as the process of intellectual clarification.² In summary form my argument goes as follows: from chapter 1 of the *Poetics* (1447^a13-16) we know that poetry is a form of *mimesis*; from chapter 4 (1488^b4-19) we observe, as Miss Hubbard has stated, that the essential pleasure and goal of *mimesis* is a learning experience; in chapter 9 (1451^b5-10) this point is confirmed and clarified when we are told that poetry is more philosophical and significant than history because it aims at the expression of universals rather than particulars; since we know from chapters 1 and 4 that all forms of *mimesis* have as their goal and essential pleasure a learning experience, tragic *mimesis* must also have this same intellectual goal and pleasure; in chapter 14 (1453^b10-14) we are told that the specific pleasure of tragedy is derived 'from pity and fear through *mimesis*' and so we conclude that the goal of tragedy must be an intellectually pleasant learning experience concerned with the phenomenon of pity and fear in human existence; since *katharsis* and its related forms are used by Plato, Epicurus, Philodemus, and other writers in the sense of intellectual clarification, there is full justification for rendering this term in chapter 6 (1449^b28) with the intellectual signification that makes it an integral part of the general argument of the *Poetics*.

Miss Hubbard, however, objects that 'a main reason' for not accepting my view is that *katharsis* in the sense of clarification would not answer the second of two strictures against art made by Plato.³ She observes that Plato's first attack on art as failing to express the truth is answered by Aristotle through his connection of *mimesis* with *mathesis*. She then asserts that Plato's second criticism of art as stimulating emotions that a good man tries to suppress requires a reply in the *Poetics*, but gets none unless *katharsis* can be interpreted in such a way as to provide it. Her solution to the problem is to adopt a view of *katharsis* that sees it as a process leading to the achievement of a morally

¹ See D. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom, *Ancient Literary Criticism: The Principal Texts in New Translations* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 86-7.

² See L. Golden, 'Catharsis', *T.A.P.A.* xciii (1962), 51-60, and 'Mimesis and Katharsis', *C.P.* lxiv (1969), 145-53.

³ Op. cit. 87-8. See especially n. 2, p. 88.

advantageous mean in regard to the emotions we experience. Her discussion here is very brief and the process she has in mind is not described with full and convincing clarity. In opposition to Miss Hubbard's view, I wish to point out that Eduard Zeller has provided a much fuller and more precise analysis of the *katharsis* question which shows that when this term is used with the intellectual signification for which I have argued, it accomplishes exactly what she wants it to do.

Recognizing that Aristotle makes no explicit statement about the way in which *katharsis* works, Zeller, nevertheless, attempts to illuminate the mechanism by which the artistic evocation of pity and fear acts to eliminate these and similar emotions which, when they occur in real life, retain their intensity for long periods of time. Zeller argues that the source of this important effect of art must reside in the principle which essentially differentiates art from ordinary reality and this principle, we know from the *Poetics*, states that art is concerned with universals while reality consists of undifferentiated particulars. By raising our perceptions from the level of the personal and individual to that of the universal, art permits a calming insight to counteract and master the disturbing emotions of pity and fear. The process is described by Zeller in the following words: '... unsere persönlichen Klagen in der Anschauung des gemeinsamen Schicksals verstummen, werden wir von dem Drucke, der auf uns lag, befreit, und unsere Gemüthsbewegung kommt schliesslich in der Ahnung der ewigen Gesetze, welche sich uns in dem Verlaufe des Kunstwerks offenbaren, zur Ruhe.'¹

Thus Zeller argues persuasively that the elimination of emotions that has been traditionally associated with the concept of *katharsis* results from the intellectual insight art is able to provide into the universal laws which govern individual events. Under such an interpretation, *katharsis*, in its intellectual meaning, is a direct answer to Plato's charge that art stimulates emotions which a good man tries to suppress and therefore Miss Hubbard's 'main objection' against my analysis of the term is removed.

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¹ E. Zeller, *Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (Hildesheim, 1963), ii. 2. 784.